

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



6

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Illustrator:

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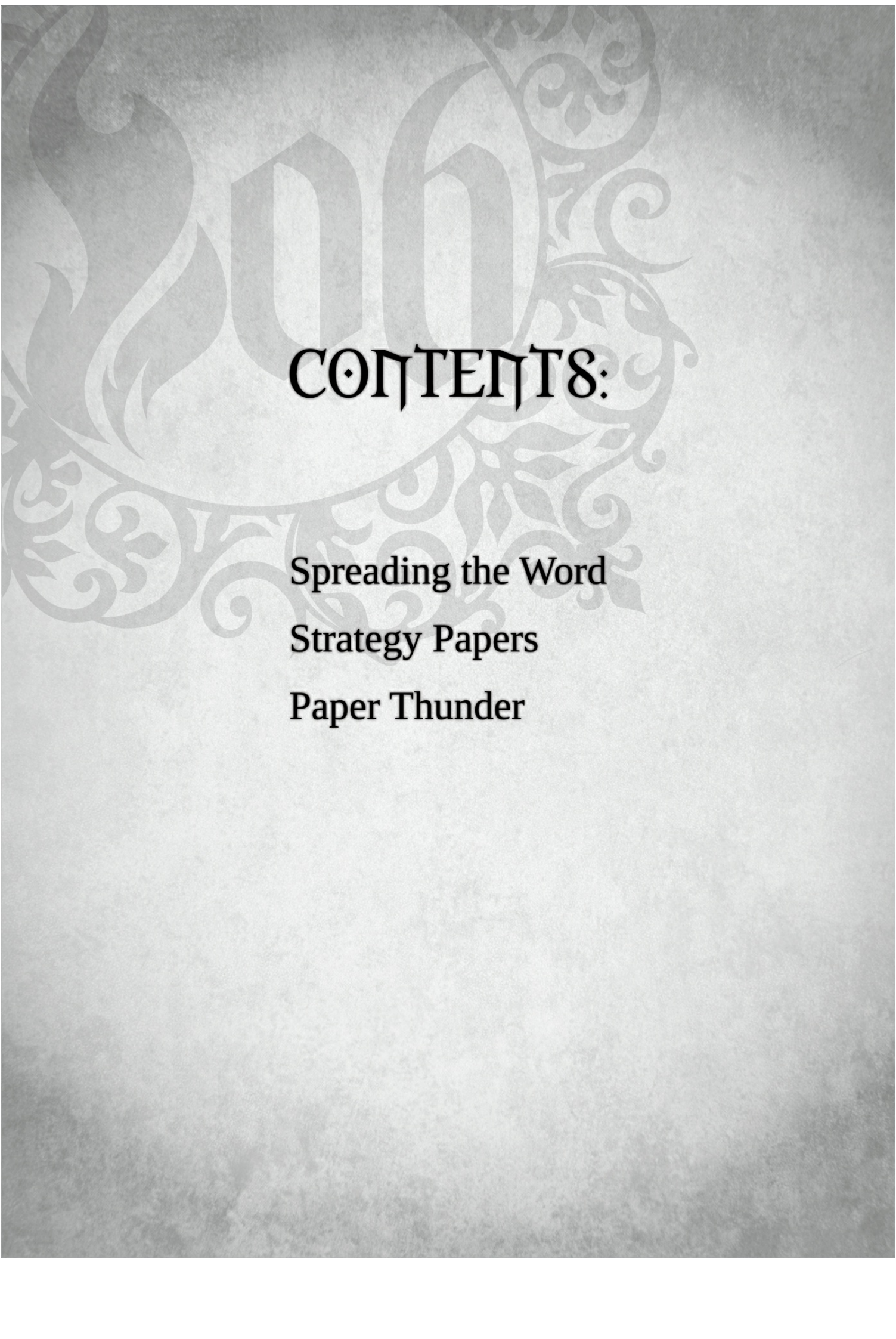


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Spreading the Word

We had finally returned to Itsutsu city. Our hot spring holiday had deviated quite a bit from the original plan. I had left as a simple man and returned as Maika's fiancé. News that should have caused quite a stir at the Promotion Office. But their reaction was...different than anticipated.

"We caused a bit of a fuss in the capital. But now we are engaged!" I announced.

Lady Renge, who had been left in charge during our absence, and her assistant Lady Suiren quickly exchanged glances.

"Um... Congratulations!" Lady Renge replied a little awkwardly.

"Congratulations!" Lady Suiren sounded genuinely happy.

That was it. Lady Renge picked up some documents from her desk and handed them to me. She had already moved on from the topic of our engagement. *What's going on? Shouldn't they be more surprised?*

"While you were away, I couldn't figure out what to do with this. Please take a look," she explained.

Perplexed, I took the documents. My confusion quickly turned to alertness upon reading the eloquent summary.

"There has been an increase in applicants who want to learn how to make brick and concrete," I observed.

"Precisely. However, our budget has already reached its limits. Even if we accept them, we may not have enough raw materials."

"That is not a problem. We were not in the capital just to play around."

As a result of my intermingling with the leaders of the remote regions, I received all sorts of donations. And since I implied that whoever gave the most would get to send their exchange students first, they all competed generously for that privilege.

Besides, upon seeing Maika's showy proposal at the Sword Fighting Tournament, many increased their investments. The House of Nepton and the House of Sukuna, among others, celebrated our engagement with a considerable amount of money.

"Huh? But isn't some of that an engagement gift for you and Maika?" Lady Renge voiced her concern.

"Yes, it is." Despite returning from a holiday, our wallets had become heavier. Even the coins filling our pockets were but a fraction of what was about to arrive from each region.

"Are you sure you should use your engagement gift on the Promotion Office?"

"Is that a problem?"

We both looked to Maika. Lady Renge's expression was saying, *It absolutely is a problem!* while my face read, *It is fine, right?*

"I approve!" My fiancée, the Promotion Office's chief, replied on the spot with the same happy demeanor that she had been wearing since winning her big prize at the tournament. *As expected.*

"Uh, Maika, are you sure? An engagement comes with a lot of costs..." Lady Renge protested.

"It's fine. This is the best way to make Ash happy," Maika waved off.

"But considering your status, you are expected to hold quite a large and expensive ceremony..."

"You're right. Most people know that I'm a Sacula. As a member of the count's family, I'm supposed to hold a grand wedding reception." Thus was the responsibility that came with the Sacula name. A heavy duty brought about by their standing at the top of the government, which Maika simply brushed aside.

"But if it doesn't contribute to Ash's dream, is it really necessary? I don't care about such boring customs," Maika continued, smiling cheerfully. Her words were not uttered in disdain or derision. She was simply expressing her resolve. That she would kick aside anything in her way.

“And if anyone has a problem with that, they’ll have to deal with me,” Maika added and directed her smile toward me. “Ash can do whatever he wants. If he needs money, then he can take however much he needs.”

She vowed to support me. All her actions served my dreams. The woman who had stolen my heart showed the determination of a usurper. *I can’t believe my luck. I just keep falling for her again and again.* Of course, I did not plan on needlessly burdening the woman I loved. I may not have been willing to give up an inch in regard to my dreams, but I was ready to help Maika kick aside anyone in our way.

“You’re both something else,” Lady Renge muttered. For a brief moment a bitter expression flashed over her face. “You really are a well-matched couple.”

“Oh, thank you.” I agreed, but hearing it come from someone else made me blush a little.

“So, could you write me a report later detailing the donations you and Maika received? I will revise the budget accordingly.”

“I already wrote a report.” I started compiling it back in the capital. Best not to leave work like that for later.

“I appreciate the foresight.” Lady Renge smiled. It appeared that the hardworking maid very much agreed with me. “In that case, we can start accepting fresh applicants right away. Should I send them to the fort as usual?”

“Of course,” I nodded. The fort in question was a small defensive installation that was in the midst of being renovated with brick and concrete. Originally, it had been built as a protective measure against threats from the Roaring Dragon Mountains, the home of the demons, but recently it had also come to serve as a safeguard against Viscount Yanga’s men. Thus, large repair works had been ordered. Or rather, I had ordered them. And somehow, I had been put in charge of the project. Not that I was complaining.

As supervisor, I sent any motivated engineers willing to learn about bricks and concrete to help. To prevent a looming tragedy, we were eager to use up our budget in order to teach them new technologies. Emphasizing a military threat to request more money was the oldest trick in the book, but it still worked. Unfortunately, my recent visit to the royal capital ever so slightly increased the

possibility of a real threat...

After I had finished dealing with Lady Renge's documents, Lady Suiren came to hand me a new set of papers.

"You wrote these up well," I praised her. She had clearly studied hard during our absence.

"Thank you. Renge taught me, and I did it together with Glen."

"I see." That must have increased her motivation, support from both her best friend and her lover.

Lady Suiren's documents detailed the results of an inquiry about the current activities of the Ajole farmers who had been scattered across the region. With Glen as her escort, Lady Suiren had embarked on a round of inspections. At this rate, those two might get married before I do.

"It seems that, despite their hardships, the Ajole villagers are doing well," I observed.

"Yes. It probably won't have any effect on this year's harvest, but the relocation appeared to be very motivating for them."

That was good to hear. While I finished reading the report, I remembered fondly the times when my hard work had paid off. Then I recalled the original purpose of our visit. *Do they really not have anything else to say about our engagement?!*

After scanning the Promotion Office reports, we moved on to the laboratory.

"We caused a bit of a fuss in the capital. But now we are engaged!" I repeated, this time to Chief Reina and Deputy Chief Hermes.

"Yes, congratulations."

"Yeah, congrats."

Is that it? Surely you've got more to say? Instead, they tried moving the conversation on to the reports that had accumulated during our absence.

"Um, should you not be a little more surprised about the engagement?"

Remember how I am the son of a poor farmer who could have easily starved to death, but now...”

Getting engaged to Maika, who would inherit the seat of the Sacula family, was a big step up on the social ladder. It could be perceived as marrying into wealth and power. Induce screaming and abuse from the masses. But the lab leaders just shrugged their shoulders.

“Everyone knew this would happen from the moment they heard you were going to the royal capital. So why should we be surprised now?” Chief Reina said.

“Don’t worry, we’re happy for you. We’ve even been discussing throwing a party together with the Promotion Office. But it’s business hours, so let’s focus on work,” Deputy Chief Hermes added.

All right... I glanced at Maika to gauge her reaction, but it seemed that she did not mind. She reassuringly patted my back, albeit with an embarrassed look on her face.

“Now, I am happy to report that the prototype steam engine is running smoothly,” Chief Reina informed us.

“That is great news indeed.”

Once the development of new farming tools for Ajole village had been completed, the research team had started seriously looking into the steam engine. It helped improve the accuracy of machine tools and it was necessary in order to study pistons and crankshafts as a preliminary step to the combustion engine. Moreover, one of the prisoner craftsmen, Rockel, had become obsessed with the mechanical marvel.

“At present, we have managed to produce one large enough to propel a horse carriage,” she continued.

“It’s a compound engine. In theory, it can withstand high-pressure steam, but for now we’ll stick with a low output,” Hermes explained. Caution was indeed advised. Increasing the pressure risked causing a potentially perilous explosion. “Still, it should be able to produce power equivalent to twenty or thirty horses. I’m thinking of letting it draw a carriage as a test.”

“A horse carriage?” I confirmed.

“A modified one. It’s a makeshift construction, but we managed to install a steering wheel.”

“Seems like you are quite into this.” The plan had been to use the steam engine for a lathe and drilling machine, but somehow, he had ended up making a car.

“I’m just playing around.”

“Putting that aside, I have a request in regard to the budget...” Lady Reina’s interjection let Hermes dodge the subject, but the budget was indeed more important. “As you are aware, since obtaining sulfur, we have expanded our areas of research. Given that some of those areas involve dangerous experiments, we thought that it may be time to establish an outside testing facility.”

“You are absolutely right. Now that we have entered territory where stuff explodes, we need to think about safety,” I concurred.

Knowing the dangers of the steam engine, Hermes nodded along. Even small models the size of a palm regularly blew up.

“But that is not an issue. We managed to procure ample extra research funds in the royal capital. Renge will inform you of the details once everything has been processed, but you can already start applying for your share,” I reassured them.

“Understood. Sounds like you took a lot of money from them.”

What a scandalous way to phrase it, Reina! They willingly invested a large sum after hearing the benefits I offered.

“Reina, Reina,” badgered Hermes. “Can’t we request a little extra money now while we’re at it?”

“Hm, I don’t know... The Sacula region is currently involved in a lot of development and renovation projects. No matter how big the budget is, it probably won’t be enough. They need to update the stoves and farming tools, and a certain someone proposed to surface the roads with concrete...”

“Right, I guess it’s not possible...” He let out a sorrowful sigh.

In response, Lady Reina held firm. *Looks like she’s shifting to big sister mode.* I glanced at Maika, who appeared to be of the same opinion. My fiancée gleefully continued observing their exchange.

“Stop making that face, Hermes. You’re still the deputy chief...and I didn’t say we won’t get any funds. It may be difficult to get approval, but I’m sure we’ll get something at least. Isn’t that good enough?” Lady Reina shrugged.

“Really? You’re the best Reina!” A big smile suddenly blossomed on Hermes’s face.

“Yeah, yeah, you won’t get anything by flattering me.”

She’s already given out quite a bit already without the flattery.

“All right, if the budget increases, that means I can do more experiments!” Hermes exclaimed.

“Hold on a minute, Hermes. You’ve got other stuff to do before starting your next experiment.”

“I know, Reina! By the way, Ash, make sure to come to the steam carriage test! I’ll tell you the date later!”

Without waiting for my reply, an enthused Hermes ran off to continue chasing his dream. After watching him leave, Maika turned back to smile at Lady Reina, who seemed a little exasperated.

“You’ve got it rough too, Reina. Looks like Hermes keeps getting more and more difficult to rein in.”

“The same goes for you. But don’t worry, he’s not as difficult to handle as your guy.” Lady Reina glanced at me before shaking Maika’s hand.

“You’ve really done it, Maika! Congratulations!” she expressed her respect.

“Thanks! I’m cheering you on too, Reina!”

That conversation was better left to just the two of them...

Several days later, as I was still tidying up some of the work that had piled up

following our sudden trip to the capital and subsequent engagement, I received the notification of the steam car's test drive date.

It appeared that they were even going to partake in today's parade. *What parade?* The one in honor of Maika's victory at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament. *Yay!*

In a festive mood, like a child before a school trip, I ventured outside the city walls toward the laboratory where I was greeted by a flashy horse carriage. I had expected the steam engine inside, but the decorations took me by surprise. Flowers and two types of flags, one with the Sacula family crest and one with a phoenix symbol.

On top of it all, in the midst of the large crowd that had assembled was Acting Count Lord Itsuki, the Promotion Office and lab staff, Glen, and various other familiar faces from the academy days, including some who were supposed to be elsewhere at that point. "Have you *all* come to observe the steam engine's test drive?" I asked, smiling at them.

It's a fun event, so I can't blame them. But they all ignored my question. In response, I started an impromptu lecture on the serious nature of the experiment. *This was not a playground.*

"You're the one acting most like a playful child here..." Lord Itsuki rebuked.

"There is nothing wrong with having a bit of fun as long as the work gets done." And I had managed to get quite a bit out of the way before coming here. I wondered if the same went for Lord Itsuki.

"I'm also here in my capacity as the acting count."

"To supervise a test drive?"

It was not really necessary for the acting count to be present, but it showed how big of an achievement this was. Still, why were the rest of them here? While I scratched my head, another group of people arrived.

"Maika, Ash, it's been a while."

I was wrong. They were not all people. Among them was a goddess.

"Yuika?! And Chief Klein? My parents? What is going on?"

Nobody mentioned visitors from Noscule village. But it seemed that I was the only one who was surprised. Maika went to embrace her parents, delighted to see them again. She also politely bowed to her future parents-in-law. She even greeted Ban and his family. *Ah, I get it.*

“Was I the only one who did not know about this?”

Lord Itsuki’s smug expression suggested that I was right. Despite the absence of malice, it gave me the urge to punch him right in the face. There was nothing I would have rather done than preserve that head in formalin. But before I did something I might regret, his sister, the goddess, approached.

“Ash, thank you for getting engaged to my precious daughter.”

“Not at all, I should be the one bowing my head to you,” I cleared my throat and bowed to my goddess-in-law. Of course, I also repeated the gesture toward Chief Klein, my father-in-law.

“She may cause trouble from time to time, but please take good care of her from here on.”

Upon confessing that I was in fact relying on Maika, my goddess broke into laughter. For a moment it felt like her divine eyes were peering into my mind.

“As her mother, there is no greater honor than hearing those words from you.”

“I am not sure what about that you would be happy to hear...”

After all, I had just told her that instead of performing my duty to protect my fiancée, she was in fact protecting me. Even downplaying it, this could have been grounds enough to break off the engagement.

“Well, you just admitted that my daughter has grown enough to support none other than Ash George Fenix. As far as I’m aware, there’s no higher praise. Isn’t that right, dear?” Goddess Yuika asked her devoted husband. Naturally, he affirmed her sentiment.

Was it really okay? I still felt a little ashamed, but Maika puffed up with pride upon hearing her mother’s words.

“Mom, I finally did it! With my sword after all!”

“Yeah, I know. You were right,” the goddess smiled wryly as she accepted defeat.

Today was full of surprises. I had come here expecting a simple test-drive of the steam car, but it looked like there was much more to it than I had been led to believe.

“Lord Itsuki, you said you came here in your capacity as the acting count,” I pointed at all the familiar faces lined up in a row, “so what is the real plan here?”

“Just like we said in advance. First we conduct the test-drive, and if there’re no issues, we’ll move on to the parade.”

“The parade?” I glanced at the strange flags stuck to the car. The symbols of Sacula and Fenix were casually fluttering in the wind. “What kind of a parade is it again?”

“A parade in honor of Maika’s victory at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament the other day.”

Hmm, so he insists on calling it a victory parade.

“And since it celebrates her victory, her prize naturally should also be on display.”

I see how it is.

“Baleas has prepared your outfit, Ash. Please change into it,” he concluded.

“You cannot fool me. No matter how you look at it this is also an engagement parade...” Otherwise why would I have to change my clothes? Not that I minded. When I agreed to marry Maika, I did so knowing my private life would mostly become public. “But why did you keep it a secret from me? There was no need to ambush me with this.”

“We *were* going to tell you,” Lord Itsuki replied.

“But you always surprise us,” Glen continued.

“So we wanted to try and surprise you for once,” Lady Reina also chimed in.

“Everyone agreed.” Even Sir George was in on the ploy.

When did I ever surprise them?!

“No wonder nobody seemed all that surprised to hear that we’d gotten engaged...” They were clearly focused on keeping their lips shut. What a bunch of terrifying people! *Fine. I’ll show them what it means to get a proper surprise. I’ve got sulfur and saltpeter at my disposal. I’ll organize a big fireworks show... Bwa ha ha.*

“Hey, don’t go planning any weird pranks in revenge,” Lord Itsuki tapped my shoulder, pouring water on my budding mischievous plans.

“The Promotion Office staff went to great lengths to prepare a suitable celebration for you two. Just quietly accept the gesture this time,” Lord Itsuki said while gazing at the decorated carriage. “I’ve never seen a celebration as magnificent as this.”

I, too, looked up at the carriage. It was most likely the only machine-powered vehicle in this world. Hermes, who had been in charge of making it, stepped forward. His face was filled with pride.

“You’re going to marry Sacula’s princess, so you have to show everyone else how big of a man you are. This is not much, but,” Hermes grinned, “I didn’t have quite enough time to build a plane yet. So, this’ll have to do.”

This was more than enough. In fact, it was overkill. Not even the royal family could top this. Besides, no matter how much their research had progressed, they must have pushed past their limits to build a steam car in such a short amount of time.

“You did not have to do this for me.”

“It’s the least we could have done,” Hermes said, as his eyes sought affirmation from the onlookers.

“It’s a happy occasion for two of our most talented colleagues. Of course we’re going to make use of our lab’s newest technology,” Lady Reina answered.

“She’s right. Only the best for our best,” Lady Renge nodded.

“You’ve done so much for us. This is nothing compared to that,” Belgo snorted.

“You two are the pride and joy of our class. If you put on a good show, that also improves our reputation,” Glen smiled.

It was unanimous. Although there were a few with sharper tongues... At any rate, their warm words of celebration blew away the hesitation. For Maika at least.

“Thanks, everyone! Come on, Ash, you have to get changed! It’s almost time for the parade!”

“What? Well, if you are fine with it, I do not mind but—” Was it really okay for me to join her? I felt like I just kept causing trouble for everyone.

“It’s fine! Let’s go!” Maika pushed me toward the laboratory to get changed.

By the time I had put on my formal knight uniform, the test drive had finished. Since there had not been any problems, Hermes hurried me into the carriage. Apparently, my griping had delayed the parade. I was tempted to blame it all on their weird prank instead.

After letting out a sigh, I climbed onto the cargo box of the modified horse carriage. There was no roof. One of the engineers was in charge of driving. The steam valve closed, and the pressure started pushing out the piston, gradually generating a rhythmic rattling sound.

“Let’s go!” The driver gave his signal, and the crowd gathered in front of the laboratory started shouting over one another.

“Congrats on your engagement!”

“Congrats! Especially you, Maika!”

“Congratulations, Maika!”

“Well done, Maika!”

Everyone was giving us their blessings, albeit somewhat biased toward Maika. Not that I minded. She did most of the work this time around.

“What do you think, Ash?” Maika whispered while entwining an arm around mine and waving at the crowd with the other.

“You’re pretty popular.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she chuckled in a cute voice. “This is the fruit of your labor.”

“Is it? Hm... I guess so.”

Considering that everyone present here was a friend or ally, our numbers had increased quite a bit. While the vehicle still did not have much horsepower, we had finally reached the mechanical age. It felt like we had sped toward a whole new era since I had left Noscula village on Mr. Quid’s horse-drawn carriage.

Moreover, I had barely been involved in the development of the steam engine. Other than asking Lady Alicia for some books, I had only read the reports and occasionally given advice. Everything else was the result of the laboratory staff’s efforts.

“They have all grown a lot.” In order to achieve my goal, I needed a lot of strength. And it seemed that strength was steadily sprouting.

“Yeah, because you lit the way forward. You showed them how far they could go. Thanks to you, they’ve come this far—of course, that includes me too.” Maika squeezed my arm and drew closer. “Besides, everyone’s congratulating me because of how amazing you are.”

“Not because they prefer you?”

“No!” Maika shook her finger. “It was easy to make me fall for you. But the other way around? Not at all. That’s why they’re singing my praises!” she boasted.



Hermes's Perspective

"Cheers!" everyone shouted in perfect unison. After gulping down our drinks, we all burst out laughing.

"Whoa! How many years has it been since we've been so in sync?" someone commented. The harmonious laughter drove away any shrouds of gloom from the cafeteria.

Not that there would have been any reason for gloom today, to begin with. The former study group members had gathered to attend the parade and celebrate Ash and Maika's engagement. And yet, their smiles lightened the mood even further.

"Hey! Food's ready! Stop giggling and start helping!"

"I've been dying to taste Chef Yacoo's food again!"

"I used to look forward to this every day. Wait, we have to carry the trays? I thought we were the guests!"

"Have you already forgotten what you learned at the academy?! Be independent! Help whenever you can! And slackers don't get dinner!"

"Yeah, lazy people only get Chef Yacoo's fists and a scolding from Mrs. Rihn!"

"Anything but that! What do I need to carry?"

"Wait, wait! I'll help too! Mrs. Rihn is too scary! Apparently even demons fear her!"

"I'll tell her you said that when she joins us later."

"What?! No, please!"

We, the former members of the study group, had reserved the dorm's nostalgic cafeteria for the night. We had always been close, and it seemed that not much had changed since our days at the academy. Our conversations were still as noisy as the rattling of a steam engine.

It felt like our graduation was only yesterday; it was the last time our laughs had filled this space. I wasn't sure whether the big grin on my face was due to

the nostalgia or if I was just happy to see that not much had changed. Either way, I was content.

“Don’t make too much of a mess. Or the new supervisor will scold you.” I pointed toward Kei, who was wearing her maid outfit with a composed expression. Apparently that information came as a surprise for quite a few people.

“Are you kidding? Kei’s the supervisor? That can’t be right!”

“She can’t be a good influence on the students! Surely someone made a mistake! We need to get her replaced!”

“Hey! What do you mean by that?” Kei yelled at her critics. It seemed that they had managed to pull the wolf out of its sheep’s clothing.

In return, they just replied in unison, “What do you mean? You loved gossiping and never kept quiet!”

“Huh? Th-That was only at the start?” she said, defending herself.

“First impressions *are* important,” I murmured and reached for the liquor. Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Ahh, you’re all too harsh. I only really behaved like that at the start... Besides, Ash and Maika appointed me supervisor,” she countered.

“Oh, you can’t argue with that, then.”

“If those two say you’re qualified, then there’s no doubt.”

Upon hearing her former classmates change their minds so casually, Kei started complaining even more. But that just showed how much those two were trusted and revered. *Just give up, Kei.*

“But it’s not just Kei, I’m also surprised by you, Hermes.” Saias turned to smirk at me after he had finished teasing the dorm supervisor.

“In what way?” I asked.

“If we’re talking about first impressions, you were even worse than Kei! You wouldn’t speak to anyone! Not even just to say hello!”

Kei quickly agreed. “Yeah, I’ll never forget how unfriendly you were when we

first met! You always ignored my greetings. I sometimes wondered why you had even enrolled at the academy!”

“But now you’re the lab’s vice-chief. In charge of a whole team. That sure is a surprise,” Saias added.

Is it? I scratched my head. Both now and then, I just kept working toward my dream.

“I may be the vice-chief, but Reina deals with all the interpersonal stuff.”

“Still, you’re in charge. You can give orders, and others look up to you. I’d never have thought you could do that... But people change...” Saias pretended to tear up. He and Kei had always liked to mess around.

“Hmm, I guess I have changed. I’ve become better at a lot of things, but there’re still people who treat me like a child...” My gaze wandered toward the lab chief. She met it and raised her cup, probably filled with ale. She loved drinking ale. When I raised my wheat liquor in response, Reina replied with a satisfied nod and resumed talking to the other girls.

“Whoa, Hermes. What was that exchange just now?” Saias asked.

“Huh? Just toasting.”

“No, no, no. You were definitely communicating with your eyes! You two always got along well, but have there been any developments?” he teased. “Should we be getting ready for another engagement celebration?”

“No way,” I replied sincerely, but for some reason, he didn’t believe me.

“What does our gossip-loving Kei have to say about this?”

“Oh, you really want to know? They have been pretty close lately. Partly because of work, but just recently, this guy here was called over to Reina’s house for dinner.”

Stop pointing fingers, Kei. That’s rude. Besides, what was so unusual about the lab’s chief and vice-chief having dinner together? And Mrs. Rihn always helped promote our latest achievements to the outside. So, naturally, we would hold briefing sessions over dinner. Especially considering how busy we all were.

“So it’s basically a done deal! Don’t be dense, Hermes!” Saias commented.

“It is! A real blow to all the guys who admired Reina. She won’t be everyone’s big sister anymore...”

I could protest all I liked, but according to them, eating dinner together was already proof that I was a part of their family. *Even if they do have a point, we really only discussed work. And, well, I got lectured on my manners like I was back at the academy. Because in my position, I guess I should know how to interact with the upper class. Oh, and they tailored me new clothes.*

“Hermes, it looks like she’s broken through your shell.”

“Absolutely. All that time playing around in that lab...” Kei remarked. “He’s fallen for Reina’s trap. Even met her extended family.”

“When?”

“She called him over for New Year’s.”

I had only shown up because Reina had invited me, saying that one of her relatives wanted to learn about planes, my field of expertise. The food had also tasted great. Still not as good as Chef Yacoo’s cooking, though. But neither Saias nor Kei cared for my explanation. Their conversation was rattling rapidly akin to a steam engine at full power.

“First Lady Maika, now Reina. Guess we single guys will have to drink a bit more to forget our sorrows today...”

“Ha ha, no doubt with the two most popular girls taken. My condolences!”

“But the same applies to the most popular boys, Ash and Glen!”

“You’re right! Lord Arthur’s gone to the capital too... Almost seems like we’ve gathered just to vent this time around.”

“Glen mentioned that Lord Arthur has been sending documents from the capital regarding the newest farming technology. Our village has also been graced with some of those tools, so I’d love to personally thank him.”

“Unfortunately, the royal capital is pretty far. I’m sure we’ll get a chance to meet him again eventually... Wait, do you already know who Glen’s partner is?”

“Suiren, right? They’ve both come to our village a few times since we’re accommodating some of Ajole village’s farming instructors. Thanks to them, our

soybean oil production has been doing pretty well.”

“I’ve heard! Chef Yacoo’s been singing its praises, saying his deep-fried foods taste even better now.”

“Really? That’s an honor!”

“He probably used it in today’s meal. Like the croquette. One of your favorites, Saias.”

As expected from two former study group members. Their conversation just kept on going, albeit no longer related to the initial topic. *Pretty noisy.* As I lifted my cup to my lips, someone placed a familiar bottle in front of me. The same one that I’m always pouring out for Reina.

“Noisy, isn’t it?”

And sure enough, Reina had sat down next to me. *What about the girls she was talking to?* Her expression told me not to worry about them. *How did I understand without asking her?* A quick glance at her face was enough to get the picture. After all, I could even discern the state of iron just by looking at it.

“It’s been three years since we graduated, and everyone’s working their own jobs,” she commented. “But it looks like they still need a few more lessons in good manners.”

“You think that would be enough to keep them quiet?” They were former study group members after all. While Reina and Arthur may have been calm and polite teachers, Maika acted pretty brazenly most of the time, and Ash just steamrolled everything in his way. Their lessons had reflected those values and rubbed off on the students; it would take a lot of effort to reform them.

Naturally, Reina also understood this, so she just shrugged and held out her cup. I refilled it without a moment’s delay. For some reason, she loved making me pour her drinks.

“But then again, this is nothing compared to the ruckus at the lab. It’s a happy celebration among comrades who haven’t met in a while. I can let it slide for today.”

“Sorry for always causing a ruckus.” As the lab’s vice-chief, I sincerely

apologized to my superior. *Hey Belgo and friends, you should thank me. I'm bowing my head on your behalf.* Together with my apology, I poured her another drink.

With her mouth concealed with her cup, she murmured, "Is it really not a done deal?"

Huh? What's she talking about? Reina frowned as I scratched my head. She abruptly raised her cup, downed her drink, and then sullenly slammed it on the table again. That gesture usually was a sign that she wanted a refill, so I proceeded to pour her even more liquor.

"Here you go. But you really should drink more slowly. Downing it like that is bad for your health."

"I really can't tell whether you've been paying attention or not..."

For the rest of the night, she kept making me refill her drink.

Half a year had passed since Ash and Maika's engagement. By now, those who were happy for them had stopped celebrating, and those who opposed it silently cursed under their breaths. If I had to choose, I'd probably place myself with the former. It'd never occurred to me that those two *wouldn't* end up together, so I didn't feel strongly about it either way.

"So Reina, if you heard that Ash had died—just an example—what would you think?"

"False news, or misinformation." She answered without any hesitation. And I wholeheartedly agreed with her. He was even more indestructible than steel. Sturdy by nature and capable of recovery even after melting.

"I have the same confidence in Maika."

"That she wouldn't let Ash escape? Me too," Reina agreed with a smile. As we walked side by side through the corridors of the administrative halls, we didn't talk about work at all.

"I mean, I'm following Ash because I've got a dream of my own, but Maika's different."

“I guess you could say that marrying him *is* her dream...but I know what you mean.”

“To be honest, it’s amazing how she wagered everything because of such plain feelings. And a bit scary...”

That girl only *looked* sweet on the outside. She used her family name and the Sacula region to win over a single man. In exchange for her hand in marriage, she casually offered Ash discretion over an entire region. Was she obsessive? Clingy? A courtesan? Whatever it was, she demonstrated overwhelming power against which not even our lab’s most powerful steam engine could compete. I only knew one other person who used such radical means to achieve their goals: her fiancé.

“My knees are shaking just thinking about those two being closer than ever before...”

“D-Don’t worry. After all, Maika is in charge of holding Ash’s reins.” Reina tried to reassure me, albeit not all that convincingly. Her knees were shaking too. We both needed the encouragement.

“Y-Yeah, I guess so. Besides, we’re not their enemies.”

“Exactly, we’re allies. We don’t have to worry about getting crushed by them...although we might...get caught up...in their rampage...”

Reina’s voice trailed off like an engine breaking down from incomplete combustion. *Hm. Yeah. She’s right. I wonder who’ll have it worse...* A moment later, we both came to the same conclusion.

“It’s definitely worse for their allies!”

“How can you show less mercy to your allies?! Yeah, there’s definitely something up with them!”

And while the answer was not in our favor, we couldn’t help but burst out into laughter. It was no use. Even if it was hard, it was just too much fun getting caught up in the rampage. Like when Ash had made us develop and manufacture farming tools for Ajole village’s revival project according to a grueling schedule. It had been tough and stressful, but we had never felt dispirited.

Ash had told us that our work would save lives. Create smiles. Save one person, rebuild a village, advance an entire civilization. His words had been so bright and full of hope. Showing the way to a promising future. A magical light in a sea of pitch-black despair. And we all loved that light. There was no way we'd let go now. We would hang on until the end.

"How sly of them. They're even depriving us of the instinct to flee."

"Must be a scam. Making us want to tag along and look after them."

We both cackled—although Reina's laughter sounded much more elegant. And before we knew it, we had arrived at our destination. The Territory Reform Promotion Office. Thus, our fun chatter ended. Now it was time for some fun work.

Upon entering the office, I noticed Ash sitting behind a pile of reports and project plans. The documents were a constant. Ash? Not so much. He was constantly bustling all over the place. I often wondered whether he was aware of his position as leader.

"Oh, hello there, Reina and Hermes." Ash greeted us politely with a gentle smile. Judging by his serenity, he was currently operating at low speed. A break from his usually busy schedule.

"We were just looking for you, Sir Fenix. The laboratory would like to ask permission to conduct a dangerous experiment," Reina said.

"That is music to my ears," Ash said as he put down the report he had been reading and held out his hand. He seemed excited at the prospect of a dangerous experiment. His gears were shifting to full speed.

"Shouldn't you be a bit more concerned about the danger?"

"It's just that I cannot contain my excitement." Ash looked at me as he took the written application from Reina. "If you are talking dangerous experiments, I imagine it is the engine test. We have finally made it this far."

Ash went on to confirm the application as eagerly as if he was reading a sequel to his favorite story. And just like he had predicted, it detailed information on the test of the radial engine I had developed. It felt like

everything had happened so fast, and yet a considerable amount of time had passed since our time at the academy.

Unlike back then, Ash was no longer as directly involved in research and development. You just had to take a look at the pile of documents on his desk to know why. His responsibilities were now the use and promotion of the lab's newest technologies, as well as the department's future. He was taking great pains to ensure technological advancement.

At first, I had thought he should just leave that boring work to someone else. I would have preferred that he help me develop new projects together. It'd be bliss to spend more time with my fellow dreamer.

But Ash had just shaken his head with a cool expression on his face upon hearing my self-indulgent wish. "The world does not automatically approve something just because it is good. It is strange. Even the soundest of conclusions based on correct numbers and flawless reasoning can be rejected for decades or even centuries," he had told me with an aggressive smile, like a viper showing its venomous fangs.

"At a certain point in time, when asceticism was the dominant philosophy, bathing was regarded as evil because it constituted a sensual pleasure. The refreshing feeling of cleaning your body was considered a sin. Even though bathing culture had existed previously," Ash had continued.

Some members of the laboratory specialized in studying medical treatment, and Reina had been annoyingly vocal about sanitary measures since we had started implementing the Agricultural Improvement Plan. So it had only taken me a moment to realize the horrible consequences of avoiding baths.

"Their righteousness took the shape of a glaring beast with unsanitary claws. And without a doubt, its favorite victims had been little children." Ash had glanced at Maika when speaking those words.

Back then, I had thought nothing of that gesture, but now I understood. Giving birth in such unsanitary conditions must have been extremely dangerous to both mother and child. No doubt, Ash had imagined the girl he liked living in such times. I felt a burning sensation in my stomach imagining it myself. Even if you denied yourself worldly pleasures, you definitely didn't want to neglect

hygiene.

“I want to make good use of your and your team’s marvelous accomplishments. And improve the living standard as quickly as possible,” Ash had concluded. “Because that is my dream.”

His speech had convinced me. We were both dreamers, just chasing after different dreams. I dreamed of flying a plane. Even if it was only one time. As long as I could show everyone the plane that I had built myself, I’d be satisfied. I didn’t care who would fly it afterward or for what purposes. That was beyond my goals.

But Ash was different. He wanted to rebuild the long-lost abundant civilization that only existed today in the form of legends. The ancient cities had been populated by an unimaginable number of people, and almost nobody had gone hungry. While that alone would have been astonishing enough, there was a miscellany of machines that made everyone’s lives easier, and high medical standards had been widespread.

In other words, my dream was something personal and temporary, and once achieved, it would dissolve into thin air like a bubble. Meanwhile, Ash was trying to create a permanent paradigm shift for the benefit of everyone. That didn’t mean that his goals were superior to mine, just that they were on a bigger scale. They couldn’t be achieved by just one person, and it was not just one single task. Most likely, his dreams wouldn’t come to fruition within his lifetime.

We were dreamers with different goals. That made me a little sad. But I knew that our paths had to diverge at a certain point.

The dreamer with the bigger ambition had just finished reading our application. His vigorous smile indicated that his engines were running at full speed now.

“This is great! Make sure to adhere to the safety measures in accordance with your application! I am sure many people will be curious, but do not let any outsiders trespass onto the testing grounds! Any accidents could indeed result in death!” Ash fired off an overwhelming salvo of warnings. His earlier serene demeanor had been replaced with a burning passion fueling the combustion

engine of his mind. But both Reina and I were used to this level of excitement from him.

“It’ll be fine, you can trust my setup, Ash!” I reassured him.

“Don’t worry, I will make sure to thoroughly enforce the appropriate measures,” Reina agreed with a wry smile.

“I’m counting on you, Reina,” Ash nodded as if he had anticipated our answers.

“Ash! You don’t trust my setup?!”

“The last time you said that, the steam engine’s piston blew off.”

“That was different! My radial engine is perfect!”

“The only thing perfect in this world is Maika’s cuteness.”

“Um... You’ve become pretty lovey-dovey these days...” Until recently, he had never expressed any interest in romance, but now he was just unabashedly complimenting his fiancée to the point that it made others uncomfortable.

“I have just become a little more honest with my feelings,” Ash laughed. At that moment, he sounded less like Ash and more like a normal human.

Our lab had originally been a hut. Although nobody would believe you if you told them now. It had been renovated using the bricks, cement, and concrete that we had manufactured ourselves. The workshop was equipped with state-of-the-art stoves and furnaces.

A canal had been built all the way to the river, and a toy-sized dam slightly elevated the water surface near the lab. This canal was used to power the waterwheel, which powered our machinery in turn. We’d stored the whole operation in a cabin next to the wheel, along with a horse carriage. Although the carriage was, in fact, now connected to the steam car instead of horses.

The car’s body had some dents following a slight accident during the test drive the other day. It had toppled sideways upon hitting a bump in the road at a surprisingly high speed. The engineers’ screams to “go faster” probably hadn’t helped the situation either.

“It’s such a unique view,” I murmured.

“You tend to forget, working here every day,” Reina added. “It really is a special place. We develop new technology and test it on-site. And since we have some exclusive tools, it can at times feel like another world.”

“True.”

After developing several projects, I had come to the realization that—given the right materials and a clear set of instructions—creating a single prototype was easy. If you had the time and money, you would eventually complete it. However, when it came to building a second or third model, you soon started to run out of both. There was a huge difference between procuring the material for a single tool or machine and the amount needed for an entire city’s supply. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what was needed for an entire region.

“Ash’s trying his best to diffuse our technology,” I said.

“And he’s already succeeded in spreading our farming tools across Sacula. Brick, cement, and the improved waterwheel are also starting to catch on... But it will be a while before the steam and internal combustion engines become popular. They’re too difficult to make.”

“Too difficult?”

“Too many numbers. There aren’t enough people who can read the plans to build them.”

Was that true? I surveyed the staff members moving around the lab. Half were former prisoners. While many of them had been artisans, they most likely hadn’t received a formal education.

“You can’t use Belgo and his crew as a standard. They’re exceptions. Ash went to great lengths to teach them... Besides, where can you find proper measuring equipment like the ones that we have here?”

“Ah, you’re right. We didn’t even have a protractor at home... So, you’d have to start by teaching them about angles.”

“That’s why Ash is focusing on education for now. In order to propagate advanced technology, you need people with expert knowledge. And money.”

“Do we not have enough money?” It looked like my careless question had made Reina’s hair stand on end. Her usually pale face turned bright red.

“How much do you think your experiments are eating up? Every single one of them! That you and your team just casually conduct! They cost a fortune!”

Now I’ve done it. It felt like I had mistakenly sipped out of a bottle filled with concentrated sulfuric acid instead of pure water. Hearing their superior get scolded, the others started looking toward us.

In response, Reina raised her eyebrows. It appeared she had a gripe with them too. “While I’m at it! You all need to stop changing things as you go along! How often do I have to keep telling you to stick to the plan! I always have to adjust our budget for the increased expenses!”

I knew what she was talking about. *Sorry.* I had done it once again with the radial engine. But why were the others just idly standing around? *Form a line and listen to your chief’s briefing!* I made a quick hand sign, prompting the more experienced members like Belgo to stand in a row.

Reina went on to give a fervent speech on the importance of adhering to the budget outlined in the project plan, how much money we had used, and how that earned us harsh criticism from the other departments.

“You can’t imagine how stressful it is to constantly ask for additional funding! Normally those requests shouldn’t even go through! And yet we always get approved?! Isn’t that weird?”

“Yeah, that’s weird!” I straightened my back and shouted in agreement. The rest of the staff repeated after me. *Good.*

“I looked into it and it turns out it’s all thanks to Ash and Maika! They’re so skilled at pulling the strings behind the scenes, it wouldn’t surprise me if they’re doing something they shouldn’t! Doesn’t that sound dodgy?”

“Yes, very dodgy!”

Reina had gradually started using the same words as the other staff members, who were largely made up of former prisoners. I had never heard her use the word “dodgy” before.

“How does a new department like ours even have all these connections? We’re in direct line with His Excellency the Count and the Acting Count, and recently even the leaders of foreign regions have started sending us messages! It’s scary that I’m starting to get used to it!”

“Yeah! Very scary!”

“That ‘scary’ just now wasn’t directed at me, was it?”

No! Afraid to upset Reina, I vehemently shook my head.

“Hmph. Okay then.” Reina flashed a fleeting smile before letting out a sigh. “Ah, I’m sorry. I think I’m just tired.”

“Everyone has days like that. Sincerely, we are grateful for all your hard work on our behalf!” For some reason, my gratitude had turned my speech a bit too formal. Gratitude and fear. The latter accounting for about eighty percent.

“You always talk your way out of it...” Reina sighed. She sounded like an exhausted mother defeated by her children. Her expression implied that she didn’t expect us to change. “Anyway, since you’re all gathered here, I have an announcement to make. We received approval to test the radial engine.”

Upon hearing the chief’s announcement, the staff roared with excitement. It seemed that some traitors had left the row to hide from sight.

Reina quickly calmed down the crowd with a couple of hand gestures before adding, “The test will take place in three days. Until then, the team in charge needs to finish and double-check all preparations. And apart from them, nobody’s allowed on the test site. Don’t do anything stupid. Understood?”

“Yes, chief!” the radial engine team, myself included, replied in unison. The others stayed silent.

Upon noticing their dissatisfaction and apprehension, Reina gave them a stern glare. “Understood?”

“Yes, chief!” This time, everyone present replied.

Following our boss’s briefing, our team immediately started preparations for the test. Although most of them had already been done by the time we’d

submitted the application. All that was left now was a final review on the day of the test, including an engine check-up.

But first, I had to go pick up some tools from the atelier. As usual, the machinery was rotating at full power. Powered by the waterwheel, the lathe, the milling machine, the drill press, and the grinder were gouging, shaving, and adjusting pieces of metal to create a number of different components.

I had never seen anything like this at the workshop back home, but by now it had become a common sight. Whoever thought of converting the energy of flowing water—or dripping water with our newest version—to generate a vector force that can be used instead of human or animal power was a genius.

At first, everyone had been flabbergasted by the intricate mechanism. However, once you got to grips with gearshifts and camshafts, you realized that it was quite simple. Nonetheless, I tipped my hat to the person who had discovered this simple mechanism. Like many other inventions, anyone could have conceived the idea, but not everyone would. It still required innovative thinking.

In addition, whoever solved the problem of unstable water flow by creating an elevation from which the water could fall was also a genius. By adjusting the elevation's height, it was also possible to change the energy output.

As the atelier was powered by the waterwheel today, it was comparatively quiet. On the days when the steam engine took over, it was pretty noisy. The only thing louder than the steam engine itself were all the people constantly requesting to work with it to increase their output. While their problems could be solved with the steam engine, it would not be very fuel-efficient, and the machine was still in the middle of development. After every use, we reviewed its performance, checked its components, and improved it for next time.

All the steam engine lovers were pushing to use it for an airplane, but I had already decided that we were going to install a radial engine instead. According to Ash, either would work, but the radial engine would undoubtedly look cooler. After all, I was drawn to airplanes by nature of their cool design. *No way I'll settle for something as lame as the steam engine.*

A while back, Rockel, who loves the steam engine, had started a fight with me

when I said that. Admittedly, I probably shouldn't have called it lame, but surely that didn't warrant a punch? It was just a steam engine...

Anyway, I had returned his punch when he made fun of my radial engine. Ultimately, I didn't hate the steam engine though. I was still involved in its production. Its appeal lay in its easily-obtained fuel, its simple structure, and the fact that it could be used mid-development.

The current steam engine that was occasionally powering the atelier had been manufactured with the use of cast iron and our lathe. First, we had produced an atmospheric pressure steam engine, but in the meantime, it had been updated to a high-pressure version.

I hated to admit it, but without that steam engine, my radial engine probably wouldn't have taken shape yet. It had taught me how to release the high pressures and high temperatures inside the engine and how much it could endure. And much more fundamentally, it taught me the basics of pistons and crankshafts.

While the steam engine worked with external combustion and the radial engine with internal combustion, they both still shared many principles. For the time being, the steam engine would continue to be the go-to motive power for our experiments. *But the radial engine looks much cooler.*

The team had gathered at the test site on the day of the radial engine's trial run. Although to be more precise, it was not so much a test site as a field surrounded by four mud walls. Ever since we had obtained sulfur, our lab had started regularly causing explosions, so those mud walls were a preventative measure. If Reina hadn't exercised her authority in that regard, there probably would have been a bunch of injured and dead people by now. *I'm proud to say that the motive power department had not caused the most explosions so far.*

Be that as it may, my radial engine had been ostentatiously enshrined atop the scorch marks. Since my goal was to eventually load the engine onto an airplane, I had made it from a light aluminum mold. For the prototype, I had kept it simple with three cylinders and an ignition coil connected to the battery. The fuel was ethanol.

“All connections okay!”

“No visible irregularities on the engine.”

“Fuel has been filled!”

“The surrounding vicinity has been cleared!”

As all the team members reported their tasks, my mind began ruminating. *All right. No problems so far. Time to start.* I tried vocalizing that last thought, but my throat was completely dried out. I was tightly clenching my fists. My heartbeat was strangely loud.

Ah, I see what's happening. I finally realized that I was nervous. But that was a very natural reaction. My dream was starting to take shape in front of my eyes. Naturally, I would face a mixture of excitement and nervousness. But my mind had stopped working and I didn't know how to proceed. As I stood petrified, gazing at the engine, Reina grabbed my hand.

“Vice-chief Hermes, you still haven't asked your superior for permission to start,” her gentle voice lit a spark in my mind. “Come on, hold your head high. This is the first step toward your dream.”

That spark started my own internal engine. “All right! Let's start the first trial run of the radial engine!” I opened my sweaty palms and slapped my stiff cheeks.



Then, I turned to my reliable superior, the woman who had become an irreplaceable part of my dream. “Chief Reina! May I start the radial engine prototype’s trial run?”

“You may start,” Reina uttered the words that she had spoken before countless experiments but for the first time added, “Good luck!”

“I got this,” I replied with a passionate voice that surprised even myself.

To ignite the engine, I had to pull a string that slightly rotated the engine. I grasped it and looked around. The other members ran to the top of the mud walls. Reina, too, was anxiously observing me from up there too.

It’ll be fine. When we had tested the steam engine, there was a small accident. The cylinder had been unable to withstand the internal pressure, which caused the piston to blow off into the distance. But this time it would be fine. *Will it really be fine?* a voice inside my head started doubting, but I shook it off and just pulled the string.

There was a small explosive sound. The ignition coil’s spark had caused the air-fuel mixture inside the cylinder to catch fire. That initial combustion set into motion the piston, which transferred its force to the next cylinder. There, the whole process repeated.

“Good, good! Looking good!”

The noises continued. Proof that the engine was functional. I could see that much from where I was standing. One by one, the three cylinders set their pistons into motion, which generated a force that was converted into rotational energy via the crankshaft.

For now, the rotating space was empty, but eventually, that would hold a propeller! Capable of carrying an aircraft a hundred times as big as the tendon-powered model plane through the skies! Once this experiment was over, I would start designing wings fitted to the size of this engine. I already had an idea of the basic shape thanks to the model plane. *Just a bit longer!*

“Hermes! You idiot! Get over here! Quickly!” Reina’s shouting voice sounded strange over the rattling sound of the engine.

But she was right. I shouldn't just be idly standing around here. I also didn't want to incur her wrath. So my body obeyed Reina's orders. I turned my back to the engine and ran in her direction toward the mud wall.

Two steps later, I heard a faint metallic shriek. I felt an urge to turn around. But it appeared my body had sworn obedience to Reina, so I took a third and fourth step, instinctively accelerating.

Now I could clearly hear that metallic shriek. My thoughts were running wild. Was it not strong enough? Was ethanol not an appropriate fuel? Maybe it was a precision error. Not enough leeway for the piston? Or a lack of lubricant?

Just as I attempted to run up the mud slope, my body was hit by the force of an explosion.

I woke up with a start. It felt like my dream had burst.

"Wha—What?"

I was at the lab's sick bay. No engine or debris. Just clean beds and the smell of medicine.

"Good morning!" Ash greeted me with a gentle smile.

His white gown coupled with the fact that I was lying on a bed gave me a pretty good idea of what had happened. Ash fixedly stared into my eyes and muttered that my pupils were fine. *I know this is a medical exam, but could you please stop silently staring at me?*

"H-Hey, Ash."

"Do you know your own name too?"

"Hermes?"

"Do you know where we are?"

"Our sick bay?"

"Good! You are conscious and not slurring your words. That is a relief," Ash said in a warm voice. "At this rate, you can start improving your engine in no time." That was all I needed to hear.

"So, the experiment failed..." My eyes were welling up with tears. A mix of

anger, frustration, and sadness built up inside of me, ready to burst out at a moment's notice. Yet, I was unable to let it free. *How pathetic.* I could feel my face turning red as I tried to keep my emotions in check.

"Yes, a complete failure," Ash nodded briefly. "I examined the engine's wreckage, and it looks like a cylinder and the fuel tank blew up from the inside. Internal combustion engines are a real challenge! In my opinion, there was a problem with the air-fuel mixture supply. It is much more likely that the tank broke before the cylinder did.

"Theoretically, it could have also been caused by thermal expansion closing the gap between the cylinder and the piston," he continued. "But not very likely given that the accident happened after starting the engine. So it seems that the prior test results rule out a simple excess or lack of strength, right?"

The words "complete failure" and "engine's wreckage" cut deeper than a knife. After delivering that knockout blow right at the start, Ash just casually continued explaining the possible causes of the explosion. *Hey, Ash. Not everyone's got an invulnerable phoenix mind like you. When normal people fail, their minds become a mess, and they get depressed for a while. But you wouldn't understand.* His explanations weren't exactly helpful at the moment. But he was right. An excess or lack of strength could almost certainly be ruled out.

"Yeah, if the cast aluminum didn't hold, we'd have a big problem. I'm inclined to agree with you, but I'll need to run some tests," I responded.

"Fortunately, you were using it on the ground, but once you take to the air, you really do not want the casing to lack resistance. That would be a catastrophe."

I nodded in agreement. It was crucial indeed. I needed to double and triple-check it. I wondered what the engine looked like right now. Depending on its state, we might have to adjust our plans.

"How much of the engine was destroyed?"

"I am sorry to report there is not much left..."

"No way! We have to rebuild it from scratch?"

“Most likely. I overheard some gripes from your staff. They were saying they would have to start over.”

That’s quite the setback... Can’t say I feel motivated...

“I will make sure to add some extra funds to your budget. I am looking forward to your next version!”

“Are you serious? Thanks, Ash!” *And my motivation’s back!* This was such a fun job! No time to be depressed! “But first I’ll have to find out what caused the explosion.”

“Yeah, you do not want to make the same mistake twice. That would be a waste.”

“It’d be tragic. And it would be disrespectful to the prototype I blew up.”

I had to find out what went wrong. My mind was already racing, planning ahead of the radial engine’s second prototype.

“I see I do not have to worry.” Ash smiled upon seeing me nodding to myself.

“Of course not. Who do you think I am?” *Aren’t we the same?* I hadn’t come this far only to give up now. “I’m chasing after my dream, just like you.”

“Yes, you are very reliable, Hermes.”

And once I had achieved my small dream, I would move to the even greater stage of helping Ash pursue his. Resolved, I smiled at him, although for some reason, he returned a pitying look.

“What’s wrong, Ash?”

“It looks like you are doing fine, Hermes, so I will be taking my leave now.”

“Oh, right.”

Ash was quite the busy person after all. He had probably paused some other work to deal with my incident. But why did he look at me like that? I would have understood if he had looked angry, but his gaze felt comforting. Or was it pitying?

“Hermes, let us get a drink sometime.”

“Hm? Yeah, sure.”

Ash encouragingly patted my shoulder and stood up. His conduct remained a mystery until the end—when he opened the door to leave, and Reina took his place.

The moment she entered, I instantly understood! The glare in her red eyes said it all. It was the same as Maika's whenever she confronted Ash after he got hurt!

"Hermes!" Damn. I had never heard her this angry. "Did I not tell you to stick to the safety procedures? And yet you didn't!"

I decided to go with the safest reaction. Just like Ash always did. I sat up straight, stiffened my face, and let Reina's anger descend upon me. *I get you now, Ash. There's no other way to do it.*

That same night, I took Ash up on his offer to grab a drink. I showed up at his door unprompted with a bottle in hand. I needed that drink badly. However, since I was aware that the Territory Reform Promotion Office's head planner had a busy schedule, I made sure to prepare an official pretext to lead into my personal problems.

"I've come to give you a quick report on the progress of our new weapon," I announced. "So now you're going to listen to me complain about Reina."

"You are quite bold to use Sacula's most classified secret as a pretext."

"Shut up! If I borrow you without a proper reason, Maika will pout again. Well, she probably will anyway..."

Maika's long-standing wish of being with Ash had finally come true. So it took a lot of courage to borrow him, even if it was just for one evening. It had only been half a year since their engagement. Although I was sure that even one year would feel like the blink of an eye to Maika. Since I wanted to stay alive long enough to build an airplane, I went on to ask Ash how his fiancée was doing.

"Reina invited her out, so no need to worry."

I gasped. While I might not have to worry about Maika anymore, it appeared that Reina would be complaining about me to her heart's content tonight. No

need to hold back then. I should have a lot more gripes than her. In order to start my grumbling, I got the new weapon report out of the way first.

“Where should I begin... For now, the new weapon prototype is coming along smoothly.”

“Yeah, I heard you have been causing a lot of explosions.”

“That’s true, but...we’re talking about the new weapon, right? Explosions caused by the weapon, right?”

I couldn’t help but think of my precious radial engine and its cruel fate upon hearing the word “explosion.” Something broke inside of me. I felt the pressure build up inside like a steam engine that was about to blow. Not like a radial engine though—that simile would have been a little too traumatic.

Clenching my teeth, I built a mud wall around my mind to protect myself from any further explosive verbal attacks.

“M-More importantly, the prototype’s development is progressing according to plan. The question is which one we’ll mass-produce first.”

“Indeed. We have to officially adopt one type. Especially with the smell of all that gunpowder in the air lately.”

“And distribution will take even longer, won’t it? But I can’t decide on the proper timing without any military knowledge.”

I could speak to the lab’s productive capacities, but I had no idea how much practice the soldiers needed to grow accustomed to the weapon. It was amazing how Ash managed to coordinate all those different tasks.

It was after obtaining sulfur that Ash had first brought up researching a new weapon. “Judging from my experience fighting the treants and the lone werewolf, it appears that hand-to-hand combat against a pack of demons would be extremely dangerous. If there are more than a hundred, our territory might very likely perish,” he had explained, before commissioning a weapon that shoots out metal with the help of explosive powder. Ash had referred to it as “gunpowder.”

“Hm, our aim is to sustain zero casualties if facing an army of one hundred

demons. In that case, we need extreme rapid-fire and long-range capabilities,” explained Ash.

“I can do either rapid-fire or long-range. Is that good enough?” I knew his response before he said it; Ash would ask for more.

“Unless we line up countless guns, they just push through. We would need to produce at least 5 units a day to have enough for an emergency. Plus, ammunition of course. Hm...let me think for a moment... We would have to calculate the required production target for the ammunition from the test firing data.”

“You’re right, it is better to have more versatile equipment given our limited production capabilities...”

Gunpowder weapons were bothersome to maintain. In contrast, swords and spears were uncomplicated. Once made, you just had to polish and occasionally repair them. The same applied to the improved horse carriage. It may have improved efficiency, but required more components, which complicated repairs.

“Maybe we can outsource some components to another workshop...” I suggested.

“Oh, so if we split up the work, I can count on you making the warheads then! Brilliant idea!”

“Of course! I’m the vice-chief of the laboratory after all!”

Now then. That was enough business talk, right? There wasn’t really much else we could discuss at this point anyway. So, time for my complaints.

“How can you talk back to someone when they’re scolding you with that look in their eyes! That’s unfair! Don’t you agree?” I just skipped all the preamble and went right into complaining about Reina’s frightening lecture. I was even tempted to call it a violation of the lab’s safety rules.

“When Maika and Reina get like that, it is best to just quietly accept it. You should not think about the reason too much. Or deny that you did anything wrong.” Ash had a distant look in his eyes as he told me to just admit defeat.

But Reina had indeed been a formidable opponent. She had even gone so far as to criticize my lifestyle, my manners, my grooming... I didn't get a single word in. Toward the end of her rant, her gripes had become completely unrelated as she had told me to notice people's new hairstyles, compliment their new clothes, and to spend more time with her instead of always drinking with the guys. But I had just sat still while my urge to complain started to boil over.

"But their glare does make you start to feel guilty." Ash smiled awkwardly in response to my groaning.

Did I feel guilty? *Really?* Had that pent-up emotion in my chest been guilt?

"Why do I have to feel guilty? I mean, sure, I should have gotten away from the engine quicker, but what's that got to do with my lifestyle..."

"Yeah, maybe that should not be anyone's business but...it is still natural to feel guilty about making someone worry that much. Especially when they have taken a liking to you."

"You certainly don't practice what you preach."

"Those were all unforeseen accidents," he protested. "I tried my best, but they were unavoidable. Not that Maika went any easier on me because of that." Ash averted his eyes. *That's a first. I don't think I've ever seen him look despondent before.*

"You've really changed."

"Have I?"

"You've become more human when talking about Maika."

"Did you just tell me that I'm not very human usually?" He tilted his head in surprise.

"Am I wrong?" I replied, mimicking his head tilt. "It felt like you held back all your emotions. You just always seemed business-oriented and emotionless when interacting with other people. Like you were only considering profits and losses."

"Really? I just felt like I was working toward my dream."

"I guess so. I'm not sure how to best put it." It was just a feeling, so it was

difficult to express. His struggle to achieve his dreams had indeed always been very human. But everything else, not so much. He was like a tool solely created for one purpose. That was probably why his presence had felt so strange.

“But when it comes to Maika you behave like any other average human. You have a strong attachment, and you’re very protective of her. You always speak fondly of her. Seeing that makes me realize that you are just another human like me.”

“Does that not mean that you are not very human either then?”

“How?”

“You have such a charming woman courting you, and yet you ignore her efforts. Like a stone,” Ash blankly replied.

“*You* are telling me that?” Even though he had ignored Maika for so long. Was I really in the same position? *No way*. “Is it that bad?”

“Yes, I am afraid so. How about you confront your feelings? Do you like her?”

Well... I’m not so strange that the affection of a pretty girl like her wouldn’t move me at all... Sometimes I caught myself gazing at her. I felt excited whenever she talked to me, and I was aware that I often relied on her.

“But I don’t think I’d be a good match. Maybe I’m not as much trouble as you, but I’m still prioritizing my work to build an airplane, so I will make her feel lonely.”

“Maika did not mind,” Ash replied with a triumphant smile. “She said I could keep chasing my dream. She would support me. Help me achieve it, so that we could always stay together...”

It sounded like he was saying that Reina wasn’t on the same level as Maika. I knew he was just taunting me. No way I would fall for that at my age. I poured myself a drink and downed it in one gulp.

“Reina’s just as supportive...”

“Hm...I might have to subtract some points there because you whispered out of embarrassment. And add some points to Maika just because she is so cute.”

“Shut up! Damn it!”

Ash really had become more human. *And more annoying.*

It had been a year since Maika and I had gotten engaged. At first it was a bit awkward being referred to as her “fiancé” but it did not take long to get used to it. In regard to communication and other aspects of daily life, not much had changed. There had always been a sort of tacit understanding between us. We knew each other’s preferences, and most of the time, we could also predict each other’s next move. And when we could not, that just offered a lucky chance to discover a new side of our partner.

All the people calling us “an inspiration for all lovers in the kingdom” would have been overjoyed to hear this. But I wondered what they would say if they actually met Maika in person.

“Ash, if I win, I want to have a baby,” Maika declared with a smile.

We would occasionally mix up our daily training session with a little contest where the loser had to fulfill the winner’s request. This was Maika’s request for the day. Out of the blue. Normally, the requests boiled down to something light like who has to make dinner. But today’s request was heavier than lead.

It was my fault. I had carelessly agreed to the challenge before hearing the conditions. Naturally, Maika had spotted the opening and gone for the head.

“That is a bit sudden...” I tried my best to force a smile.

It was not like I did not want to have children with Maika. The opposite was true. However, there were some obstacles at the moment. Like the fact that we were not married yet, and the lack of advanced medical technology ensuring the survival rate of both mother and child.

My farmer background was a bottleneck for our marriage. Even in a meritocratic region like Sacula, there were still people like our former foe Moldo who wielded power based on their ancestry.

Besides, Maika had already drawn too much attention from other regions during her flashy performance in the capital. If we got married right away, we could almost certainly expect some unpleasanties from the likes of Marquis Dataro and Viscount Yanga. And since we did not want our wedding to be

disturbed by that tactless bunch, one year after the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament, we were still just engaged.

Recently, Maika had been saying that she wants to get married. Usually while swinging her sword. Probably letting off some steam by imagining severing some heads.

Furthermore, it went without saying that the lack of advanced medical technology was the cause of high death rates for women during childbirth. I did not want to perform a cesarean section with the current health standards. When it came to that procedure, the mother had usually already used up all her strength.

While I was not confident that I could improve medical standards to an adequate level in two or three years' time, I had developed a tool to assist childbirth. In my past life and in this world's ancient civilization, people had used a tool called "obstetrical forceps" to help deliver the child. It was currently being tested by our lab and Dr. Lusus in the capital. The data was already promising, showing an increased success rate.

So, I'm sure you understand why hearing my cute fiancée talk about wanting children puts me in a difficult spot. Naturally, I wanted both my prospective wife and children to stay alive and healthy.

In other words, the main concern was the state of medical technology. The criticism did not bother me. Maika's cute voice drowned out all their complaints so thoroughly that they became no louder than a feather hitting the ground.

Either way, Maika's request still put me in a tight spot. I could not afford to lose this fight against the headhunting princess. A quick glance at my sweet Maika, who readied her sword in high spirits, sufficed to show how difficult that would be. She resembled a bird of prey. Determined to slay her opponent no matter what. Although there was no real danger, I felt shivers going down my spine.

I once again wondered about all the people who called us "an inspiration for all lovers in the kingdom." Would they keep saying that if they could see my fiancée now? How she openly professes her love through words and actions. "Kingdom" was too trivial. It should have at least been "planet."

Of course, I also held a deep affection for her, so I had no intention of granting my cute Maika's request.

"If I win, I want to use your lap as a pillow after dinner."

Maika's cheeks flushed red upon hearing my request.

"Okay. You can rest your head there until you fall asleep."

Super cute. It looked like the spectators in the gallery had begun questioning our sanity. But no devoted couple's conversations sounded sane. You just had to look at Goddess Yuika and Chief Klein. When they were by themselves, the chief did not behave like a sane person.

"Ready when you are, Ash."

"So am I."

Then I assumed a defensive position as my fiancée charged at full speed.

Seire's Perspective

I was witnessing an astonishing spectacle. Even though I was watching from a distance, I could barely make out Lady Maika's movement.

"She's fast," I said, but I immediately realized that there was more to it. Of course, her speed was extraordinary, but Lady Maika's movements betrayed the expectations of anyone focusing on her swiftness alone. I looked to the Sukuna knight standing beside me. Since our region specialized in reconnaissance, our military training also emphasized fighting between humans. As someone who had undergone that training, he forced a nervous smile.

"I'm not confident I could deal with an opening move like that. She accelerated to full speed from a state of rest. The ideal move."

I nodded in agreement. Although I had also received some training for self-defense purposes, I probably wouldn't even be able to react at all. I would have lost my head before I knew what'd happened. I shivered; my neck felt cold at the thought.

However, Sir Fenix effortlessly parried her blows. With a composed expression on his face, he withstood Lady Maika's continuous assault. Her strikes occurred in such rapid succession that it almost seemed as if she had split into multiple people. And even though the slightest mistake could lead to painful consequences, both of them seemed to be enjoying the fight as if it were a dance.

"As expected, you're good, Ash!" Lady Maika retreated, delivering him a compliment in place of her incessant attacks. Even from afar you could see the glare in her eyes. Adorable yet threatening. But without a doubt, it was fascinating to see her face an opponent head-on with such enthusiasm.

"You are a little faster than usual, but it's not that much different from our daily training sessions. If that is all you got, maybe we should call it a draw?" Sir Fenix appeared quiet and even a little embarrassed facing his fiancée, who rejected his proposal with a smile.

"I was just warming up."

"Thought so. Are you ready to get serious then? Just make sure not to strain yourself."

"Don't think I'll go easy on you just because you worried about me!"

Those two were something else. Even within that short exchange...they were flirting. *How passionate.* At that moment, they resumed their fight, fiercer than before.

"So that was just a warm-up..." Of course, the Sukuna knight seemed shocked. Moments before, he had praised her movements as ideal, so how could they possibly go beyond that level?

Lady Maika was moving around the sides. If you thought she was coming at him from the front, she suddenly appeared behind his back. One moment her sword was pointed at her opponent's upper body, the next it swiftly moved toward his wrists or feet. It was a miracle Sir Fenix hadn't been injured yet.

It was like a whirlwind of blades. If I were down there myself, I would have been chopped up into pieces in an instant. Yet, Sir Fenix kept evading her blows. He parried and dodged every move at a moment's notice as if he knew where

her attacks would land.

As someone who didn't specialize in fighting, I had no idea what was going on. Or what either of them was doing. However, it seemed that the knight beside me did.

"It's terrific. Not sure if I should be shocked or amazed."

"What is? It all seems incredible to me."

"Their harmony. It's a dance that only those two can perform."

A *dance*. That whirlwind of blades. It didn't look that leisurely from where I was standing. Seeing the confusion on my face, the knight smiled wryly.

"They probably train together all the time. I overheard something along those lines earlier. They are used to each other's movements. He knows how she'll attack, and she knows how he'll defend."

A sideways sweep grazed Sir Fenix's red hair. If that had landed... I didn't even want to imagine.

"Did it not hit?"

"If it had, it would have been a bloodbath..." I replied.

"I guess he wouldn't have pulled away if her strike had landed. And she's moved on to the next attack already. Lady Maika seemingly anticipates Sir Fenix's evasive and blocking maneuvers. All their moves are probably improvised, but it sure looks like choreography."

"And so they're amazing, right?"

"Yes. How much time must they have spent training together to reach this level." There was a certain yearning in the knight's eyes. Either he was impressed by the display of swordsmanship or charmed by two youths' affectionate dance. Whichever it was...

"It's essentially just a public display of their love for each other, isn't it?" I forced a smile.

"I don't know what else it could be," the knight replied with a smile so bittersweet that it was as if someone had forced him to swallow a pot of honey.

“There’s not much room for me to step in...” No matter how much I trained, I would never be able to dance like that. I wondered if that had been one of Lady Maika’s goals. To set herself apart from any competitors.

Their sword dance continued until Lady Maika finally ran out of steam, and it ended in a draw.

“Ah, I’m done!” Lady Maika shouted before collapsing on the ground. There was a huge surge of applause from the spectators. As if they had just watched a tournament final. Why was Lady Maika lying on the bare ground? *She’s going to ruin her hair!* I grabbed the towel and water bottle and hastily ran toward her.

“Lady Maika, your hair is getting dirty. I will prepare a bath for you later, but for now, please wipe off your sweat with this towel.” Lady Maika took the towel and bottle and brushed aside her sticky forelock as she stood up.

“Thanks, Seire. Hmph. I thought I could beat him today, but I was wrong.”

“Are your fights always this intense?”

“No way. Today we made a special wager, so it got heated. I used some secret moves, but Ash still managed to see through me. I can’t hide anything from him.” She pouted with a happy look on her face.

“Sounds like you’re so close that you can practically read each other’s minds.”

“But I’d prefer if that didn’t include my fighting techniques. Still, it makes me happy. I guess that’s the weakness of love.” Embarrassed, she idly scratched her cheek. She looked so cute that I began to feel a bit jealous.

“I wish I could find someone like that,” I sighed. To quell any possibility of a misunderstanding, I quickly added, “Oh, sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Sir Fenix is a charming person, but I don’t intend on getting between you two.”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t take it that way,” Lady Maika reassured me. “I’m aware of Ash’s charms better than anyone else, so I can understand why people are drawn to him. Don’t worry. You can try interfering or butting in as much as you want.” A sudden ferocious aura surrounded her. “But you’ll have to put your life on the line.”

She didn’t give me any sharp looks. And her words weren’t a threat. But she

wasn't exaggerating or joking either. She was serious. Thus was the resolve necessary to stay by Sir Fenix's side.

"That sounds terrifying..." It sent shivers down my spine. Truly terrifying. "But I like the sound of it."

Generally, I preferred the unknown to the known, the difficult path to the easy one. In that regard, I loved Maika's warning. It got me excited. I instinctively smiled, as did Maika.

"He he, you're also quite peculiar in spite of your pretty looks. But if you're serious, I won't stop you. You'll fit right in here in Sacula with that attitude."

"Yeah, we'll see once I visit as an exchange student. I'll have enough time to make my decision then."

The House of Sacula had come to Sukuna to invite exchange students to their region in order to teach them about their advanced technology. To my delight, I had been chosen as our region's candidate. I was going to be in Sacula for one to two years.

"To be honest, I don't have any prospective suitors, so I was thinking about looking for one in Sacula. It would strengthen the relations between both our regions, and if Sir Fenix and his company are anything to go by, it appears that Sacula has a lot to offer."

"Who did you meet? Glen and Hermes? Oh, and George? Yeah, they're all great people."

That's right. When they had visited our hot springs last time, all the young girls had lamented that all those brilliant men had—understandably—found partners already.

"Ash is undoubtedly still the best though," Maika added.

"Your comments are quite persuasive," I replied sincerely.

I was sure that if I could stay by Sir Fenix's side, he would show me a whole new world. Things that I didn't know, things that nobody else knew. *What a fascinating person.* At least to me.

I wanted to see his world. As quickly and as closely as possible. So much so

that I wouldn't even mind becoming his mistress or servant. I needed to encroach upon the House of Sacula during my exchange. Therefore, I also needed to leave a good impression with Lady Maika, who enjoyed Sir Fenix's affection.

While she was wiping off her sweat, I moved behind her back and dusted her hair. Of course, that wasn't enough to clean off all the dirt; her beautiful black hair had become a mess.

"Lady Maika, you should go take a bath."

"You're right. We're at the hot spring, after all. But first..." She turned and walked toward Sir Fenix. "Ash, nice fight."

While she had tried to keep up appearances with me, she was now grumbling and getting her fiancé to comfort her. *You're already showing off again.* She may have said that she wouldn't stop me if I was serious, but she had no intentions of letting me get close either.

Hm. She's a formidable foe. But this only spurred me on even more. I was quite the troublemaker, even if I did say so myself. The harder something was, the more zealous I became.

As I pondered what to do, I heard them engage in some lovey-dovey talk about using her lap or her arms as a pillow. At the same time, my grandfather, who had kept Sir Fenix company until just now, approached me.

"Aren't you a little too proactive, Seire?"

"Oh, you noticed?" I concealed my smile with my hands. Somehow, I was happy that he had seen through me.

"You've become quite mischievous since meeting Sir Fenix. There are rumors going around that you have fallen in love with him. You must be doing this on purpose."

"He he. No, I'm just inexperienced." Of course, that was a lie. I had been outspoken about my feelings and even exaggerated on purpose in order to express my desire to visit Sacula. As Viscount Sukuna's granddaughter, I couldn't directly state those kinds of things. Thus, I had gone about it in a roundabout way. Luckily, my grandfather's keen eyes had noticed my feelings

and suggested me as a candidate.

“You have to make sure not to be too forward or you’ll clash with the Sacula family.”

“Yes, I will be careful.” I politely nodded. At the same time, I couldn’t make any guarantees. A head-on collision was more in line with the House of Sacula’s attitude than playing a people pleaser. Lady Maika seemed like the type who would cut my head off if I meddled behind her back, whereas she might even look after me if I confessed everything to her.

“I’ll leave the details to you, but please do hold back a little. Okay?” my grandfather warned me again.

“I am no match for you, grandfather. I will bear that in mind.” My grandfather could probably even tell that I was clicking my tongue on the inside. I saw him frown.

“Oh dear! Sacula’s already had quite an impact on you. You used to be so quiet. I wonder what you’ll be like once you come back. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too.” I would probably surprise myself. I sincerely hoped so.

“Just make sure to follow the basic guidelines, Seire. That is an order,” my grandfather commanded in his function as the viscount of Sukuna.

“Yes, Your Excellency. I shall obey,” I replied as a vassal rather than his granddaughter.

“First, you have to prioritize Sukuna’s interests over Sacula’s.”

That was obvious. The House of Sacula may have been a generous ally, but they were still a foreign entity. So, if it came down to a choice, I would prioritize my own family.

“However, I will allow you to prioritize Sir Fenix’s interests over Sukuna’s.”

Now, how should I react to that order? Should I be perplexed? Astonished? I was supposed to prioritize Sukuna over Sacula but could prioritize Sir Fenix, who would soon become part of the House of Sacula, over Sukuna. Wasn’t that a contradiction in itself?

“You are truly impressive, Seire. To smile after hearing that command.”

“Oh, did I smile?” I touched my mouth. Indeed, my lips had formed an inverse arch. Shamefully, my teeth were also showing. My grandfather’s scheme had just been too delightful.

“If I had to take a guess, I would say that Sir Fenix will be the most influential person for the next fifty years.”

I agreed. Fifty years was still far into the future, and I couldn’t tell what lay beyond the horizon until the sun had risen. Still, even now in the dark of night, I could vaguely make out Sir Fenix’s contours if I strained my eyes.

“Our relationship with him will influence the next hundred years. You may say that someone as ordinary as me cannot predict the future...but I can still hope or at least wish that Sukuna’s name will be mentioned alongside that boy’s a hundred years from now.” He smiled with a hopeful look.

“Understood. An assurance for a brighter future. You chose the right person.”

For a prediction that may or may not come true, I was perfect for this role: neither too high nor too low a rank as both family member and vassal. This was why I had been chosen as a partner for Sir Fenix.

“Sorry about making you seek out an engagement.”

“What are you talking about? That is only natural as the daughter of nobility,” I replied. “Besides, I don’t mind.”

I had asked for it after all. There was no need for my grandfather to apologize. When I flashed him a smile from the bottom of my heart, my grandfather finally regained his composure.

“Now then, Seire. To secure our future one hundred years from now, I will allow you to prioritize Sir Fenix’s interests.”

“Understood. For the sake of my family, I will prioritize his goals over our own.” In anticipation of my next sentence, my heart started throbbing. “And depending on the situation, I might have to oppose you too.”

I was surprised, myself. Apparently, I was more of a bad girl than I had previously thought. Hearing my shaky voice, my grandfather frowned again.

“When that time comes, go easy on me.”

“Of course, Your Excellency.”

In other words, I could go right ahead. I was really looking forward to my stay in Sacula. From here on, things would get busy. Even if I prioritized Sir Fenix’s intentions, I couldn’t just outright abandon contact with Sukuna. I had to find the right balance of sharing information. It would not be smooth sailing. Which only made it an even more interesting task.

And I would be facing my grandfather, who had taught me all the spy tricks I knew! I couldn’t see a path to victory against such a strong opponent. But that was the fun part. As the House of Sukuna’s sheltered daughter, this was the first time I had been given such a truly wonderful opportunity.

“I can’t thank Sir Fenix enough.”

It was a dreamy day. The gentle spring sunlight caressed the earth, the horses drawing the heavy carriage were happily clopping along, and all I had to do was sit back with a hand on the reins.

“Sir Fenix, you’re pretty good at that,” a voice called out from the wooden window behind me. It belonged to Seire Sukuna, the granddaughter of Viscount Sukuna who governed the hot spring region.

“Not at all, the horses are just smart,” I replied and showed her the slack reins. This only prompted further admiration from the beautiful Lady Seire.

“That just shows how much the horses acknowledge you...”

“I do not remember doing anything that warrants such acknowledgment. What do you say?” I jokingly asked the horses, who neighed in response. *What great timing! They really are smart. They deserve some extra brushing time next break.*

“Horses match their behavior to their master’s. They must respect the renowned Sir Fenix to be so obedient.” A boy with a deep voice and a fiery gaze looked this way. This was Arun, Nepton knight Sir Seus Argos’s son. While he had different facial features, his defined, muscular body rivaled that of his bold,

manly father. “It is an honor to be in the hands of such an apt driver. We are truly grateful for the House of Sacula’s consideration.” There was one more citizen of the Nepton region in the carriage. The youngest and maybe most courteous of the three was Medie Raino, Officer Anne Raino’s daughter. Under her innocent smile hid the influence of her diplomat mother. She radiated a certain flamboyance that contrasted with Lady Seire’s more modest aura.

Together, those three made up the first wave of students received by the Sacula region. Once we had come up with a tentative structure for the program, we had invited students from regions with which we had especially close ties. *As you may know by now, I—Ash George Fenix—love to meet and exchange favors with kind people.* Right now, I was on the way back from the Sukuna region where I had picked up three very kind students.

“Is it comfortable back there in the carriage? It is equipped with some of Sacula’s newest advancements.”

“There’s surprisingly little shaking. That can’t just be because of the soft cushions...” said Arun, a knight-in-training back home. His report was backed with experience; transporting goods and escorting carriages were part of a knight’s duty after all.

“That is quite right. Along with modifying the wheel itself, we placed a shock-absorbing device on its axle.”

More specifically, it was equipped with a suspension mechanism consisting of springs and shock absorbers. It was an effective way of fending off the unpaved road’s assault on our butts.

“How does the mechanism work?” the young knight-to-be inquired.

“We bound metal to the spiral of the spring, which absorbs any shocks by expanding and contracting.”

The shock absorber dampened the blow by triggering a piston that spreads highly viscous liquid. As a result, it was finally possible to comfortably ride in a horse carriage. Of course, both devices required advanced manufacturing technology. If the spring was too hard, it did not contract properly, and if it was not hard enough, it would easily break. Similarly, if the shock absorber was not airtight, the piston risked pushing the liquid out of the container.

“It took us a lot of work to manufacture the devices. There are still a lot of ways to improve and refine them, but the prototypes are good enough for practical use, as you can see.”

We were currently operating several prototypes to investigate the merits of different suspension systems, the best location, and the durability after repeated use. In addition to the Sacula family and the military, the Quid company was also extremely cooperative. They had bought ten prototypes and tested them all over the kingdom.

“I can somehow imagine what the springs are like. But the absorber? No idea...”

“It will be easier if I show you the actual device and the blueprints later.”

While Arun’s eyes sparkled in anticipation, Lady Seire’s showed some trepidation.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? If you show us the blueprints, someone could memorize them and imitate your technology.”

“Of course. That is precisely why we invited you over.” In fact, I expected perfect imitations. *I’ll even throw in an annotated version of the blueprints as long as stocks last!*

“That’s very generous of you...” Lady Seire hesitatingly smiled. As someone who had undergone Viscount Sukuna’s expert reconnaissance training, she appeared to object to my handling of Sacula’s proprietary information. But before she could give me advice, she came to a realization. “Are you by any chance being so inviting because it is related to transportation and will inevitably be seen by others?”

“Yes, it is not exactly something that you can use in the confines of your home.” My answer seemed to be enough to convince Lady Seire.

Since the carriages equipped with the prototypes traveled beyond Sacula’s borders into foreign territories, there would be more than ample opportunity for others to inspect or even violently steal the devices. Unlike soap and liquor, it was possible to more or less accurately determine their composition by disassembling them.

“Makes sense. It’s too difficult to keep a secret.”

“Besides, it would not be very efficient to monopolize consumable goods used on a daily basis,” I added.

The suspension mechanism undoubtedly had a higher performance than normal horse-drawn carriages, but it also required more consumables. So, if the technology was monopolized, it would be impossible to repair the suspension mechanism in case it broke down in a different region. You would have to call over an engineer all the way from Sacula. But that was ridiculous. Worst-case scenario: the engineer might even get abducted by a foreign power.

Thus, it was much easier and more efficient to just make the blueprints openly accessible. That increased your chances for receiving aid, and you did not have to fret about keeping it a secret.

“My mother told me that the frontier regions alliance, proposed by the House of Sacula, envisions stimulating the flow of resources between its member states,” Lady Medie said. She was clearly interested in our conversation.

“Correct. It is not uncommon for a resource to be abundant in one region but completely absent in another. An active circulation of goods is beneficial for both daily necessities and emergencies.”

“I concur. And I can see that you are very serious about that alliance,” she remarked.

I’m always serious. Since hearing that story told by a goddess at eight years old, I had kept running at full speed as I scaled the hellish mountain called life. I had to live fast or else I risked dying before achieving my goals...

“Both you and Sacula seem to really need that alliance.”

“Neither I nor Sacula have the time to deal with unnecessary procedures.” After all, the Sacula region was a danger zone with regular fights against demons.

“Looks like we’ll get left behind and suffer losses unless we get proactive.”

You’re more than welcome—if you can keep up with me. All three of them were looking at our work from a different angle, but they were quick to

understand. While it had seemed that the students were chosen mostly based on their social standings, it turned out that they were also very skilled. Thus, I adjusted my expectations upward.

“And here in front of us we have another technology that I want to disseminate just like the suspension mechanism.” I pointed ahead. At the road below to be precise. All of a sudden, the unpaved dirt road had transformed into a paved concrete road.

The ride became even more comfortable once the horses stepped onto the new material. In comparison, the journey up until this point could be classified as unbearable. Other than the stone roads in the capital, no thoroughfare in the entire kingdom felt this smooth. Naturally, the students were astonished.

Since we used cement as an adhesive for creating bricks, it was relatively easy to obtain concrete. All we had to do was add sand and gravel into the mixture. However, it had taken a lot of effort to upscale the production to a level that could provide the amount necessary to pave this road. We had to increase our funds, facilities, and manpower.

Even after obtaining the concrete, it still took a lot of time and effort to actually build the road. It was a large-scale public works project. Optimistically, it would take five years to pave all of Sacula’s main roads. According to Lady Renge, who was in charge of the Transport Network Improvement Plan, it may even take eight years due to a lack of manpower.

At the same time, it was not like the roads outside the region would pave themselves. No matter how much we improved our transport network, it would not help inter-region circulation if the paved roads just stopped mid-way at Sacula’s borders. So, what was the solution? Get the other regions to pave them themselves.

“If we are going to increase the interaction between our regions, we have to make transport more convenient. Thus, I want you to bring both the suspension mechanism and the concrete road back to your regions.”

An improved transport network could only bring us closer to our neighbors.

As I was discussing paved roads with the exchange students, a sturdy horse gracefully rode up to the carriage. Upon its back sat Maika.

“Ash, can I talk to you?” she asked in a gentle voice.

Of course. How could I ever ignore a request from my beloved fiancée? Maika, who was clad in light leather armor, happily reciprocated my smile. Thanks to our relaxing stay at the hot spring, her face was even cuter than usual. With that cute face, she gestured ahead.

“Didn’t you say that spot bothered you earlier?”

“Yeah, great terrain for an ambush.” It was a slight upward slope with a large curve.

“I’ve got a bad feeling. What do you think?”

“We probably should send a scout ahead.”

“Thought so. I’ll go then.”

“Alone?”

“Don’t worry so much.” Maika pouted. Although she still looked happy, unlike when she had failed to beat me in our duel. She raised her hand to cue the escort guards.

“I need five of you to come with me. Three will stay to guard the carriage!” She gave the orders in her usual cheerful voice. No fervor or agitation. As if they were going to search for the ideal picnic spot. “We’ll eliminate the enemies as soon as we find them!” My lovely fiancée was such a brave warrior.

“Is Lady Maika leading the reconnaissance troop herself?” Lady Medie’s head peeked out as the sound of galloping hooves steadily increased.

“Yes, she is. So no need to worry at all.”

“Sir Fenix as our driver and Lady Maika, the headhunting princess, as our escort. This is truly a treat,” Anne Raino’s daughter commented. What a nice compliment! Nothing made me happier than hearing my darling fiancée get praised.

“I will just stop here for a moment.” I slightly pulled the reins to signal the horses to slowly come to a halt.

“Is there a problem, Sir Fenix?” Arun sounded a bit nervous.

I gave a faint nod in response. It appeared that my five senses were sharper than everyone else on board. Nobody else had heard the sound of the scouting party scattering the enemy.

“It seems like there was an ambush after all. The scouting party has just engaged in battle, so we will take a short break.” Probably no longer than twenty minutes.

“Will we be okay?” Lady Seire knitted her brows in worry. I could not blame her for feeling anxious during a bandit ambush so close to her study destination.

“My sincerest apologies. Recently, we have had an influx of bandits in Sacula.”

“Oh, I knew that. I’ve heard that there are some people in and around the capital who are not too fond of Sacula.” Lady Seire was letting me know in a roundabout way that she was aware of the situation involving Viscount Yanga and Marquis Datara.

Sacula once prided itself on a low crime rate. The recent influx of bandits was a direct result of Viscount Yanga’s actions. Following Marquis Datara’s orders, the viscount and his military had started sending the many people suffering from hunger under his poorly managed regime toward Sacula in an effort to cause trouble.

Since Sacula’s food self-sufficiency rate had been steadily increasing these past years, we welcomed all well-behaved refugees with open arms. However, we refused the ill-mannered ones who were better described as “bandits.” In fact, it was hard to believe that a simple refugee would have been experienced enough to launch a surprise attack on a VIP convoy like ours...

“Those attacks have been running up our expenses, so I have been thinking up some countermeasures. So rest assured the problem will be taken care of in the near future.” *Please don’t describe our region as dangerous in your letters to your families.*

“Oh, I wasn’t worried so much about that...” Lady Seire glanced in the direction where Maika and the others had disappeared, “But I wonder if they will be able to deal with the ambush. I hope there aren’t too many of them.”

“Oh, right.” There was no need to worry about that. Maika counted for ten people and Glen for eight. So, in essence, the five knights were currently fighting with the strength of twenty people. They could easily deal with even fifty bandits. “Rest assured, the knights and guards in Sacula’s service are extremely skilled fighters.”

As if to underscore my statement, the fighting noises had stopped. It felt like about ten minutes had passed. A little faster than expected. Either there had not been that many enemies or Maika had been highly motivated.

“We’re done, Ash,” Maika said. She came riding back with light steps as I instructed the horses to move again.

“Thank you. I assume you did not get injured, but are you okay?” Maika had lined up next to me. I could see some faint sweat on her face but no traces of blood. Still, I wanted to make sure my love was all right.

“He he, of course. Luckily, I didn’t have to worry about arresting them this time, since protecting the convoy was our priority. Child’s play,” Maika replied in a playful voice.

“Does that mean...she killed everyone...?” a voice murmured in the back.

Itsutsu city, the home of Count Sacula—disregarding the fact that His Excellency mostly resided in the royal capital these days—had rapidly changed over the past few years. Until not too long ago, a stone shortage had limited the city wall’s length, as well as the city structure itself. Most buildings had naturally been made of wood.

However, in recent years, technological advancements had solved the stone shortage. To the delight of the stonemasons, brick and cement had emerged as alternatives to natural resources. For years, their only jobs had been to fix the city wall and the count’s mansion, but now, thanks to the new materials, they had a whole new slew of possibilities. They had even gone ahead and built a second mansion.

The new residence had three floors and it was made of brick. It was a state-of-the-art structure equipped with a fireplace to stay warm in winter. In fact, it provided a more comfortable living environment than the first mansion. As an

engagement gift, Maika and I had effectively been given the right to call it our home, but we did not know what to do with this jewel. It was too big and lavish, the result of the stonemasons' joy, passion, and originality, and it was just for the two of us. It did not match the frugal spirit of people who had grown up in a poor village.

"Ash, how about we let the visiting students stay here?"

"That is a great idea. We will make this a guest house!"

And thus, the new second mansion had become the guest house in which we were currently hosting the three visiting students.

"Wow! There are so many oil lamps!" Lady Seire was surprised to see that oil lamps accounted for the majority of lighting in this place.

I had decided that if we were going to use the new mansion as a guest house, we might as well put our local products and technology on display. Of course, there was also a bath equipped with soap. And I was proud to say that thanks to the oil lamps, you could walk the halls after dark.

In addition, we had put models of the lab department's current projects on display. This included our popular model plane, a model steam engine, and an alloy ingot. Of course, *someone* had nonchalantly placed a model radial engine next to the steam engine...

Why pretend it is complete like the others? Didn't it explode only six months ago? Of course, I knew who the culprit was: the man who regarded the radial engine as the non plus ultra of motive power. *I'll have Reina scold Hermes later.*

There was virtually no artwork. The only things that could classify as such would be the weapons on display. They had been put there just in case they were needed in an emergency. A very practical and Sacula-like decoration. Moreover, they were all the types of swords that Maika liked to use. All in all, this mansion was full of engineering marvels! *And personally, I'd even include Maika's swordsmanship in that category.*

"I heard that you were making strange stones, but seeing them like this... Would you mind telling me what material you used for this building?" Lady Medie asked while touching the brick walls.

“Those are bricks. They are also part of the knowledge we are willing to share. After all, it is pretty inconvenient without them.”

“I very much appreciate the gesture. We are in dire need of sturdy material for our buildings. Currently, only the central houses use stones.”

“Yes, wooden structures are a big fire hazard. A concentrated single fire could easily destroy a whole city. I imagine you also would like to expand your city walls.”

Fires were the second-most common cause of urban destruction in this world. Demons came in first place. Although I imagined in the last hundred years, fires may have gained the upper hand as demon attacks had decreased. Maintaining some distance between the buildings could reduce fire damage, but most cities only had limited space because they lacked the resources necessary to extend their city walls.

In any case, many frontier cities were lacking the stone material to create a safe environment. But by solving their stone shortage problem, you could instantly aid in their growth and development.

“I am eternally grateful. Of course, I will do my best to repay you,” she replied.

“Thank you.” Her words were music to my ears. After all, I subscribed to the mantra that kindness begets kindness.

It was impossible for a single region to both sustain a constant supply of materials and construct new equipment, so I wanted to share the production with trusted allied regions as soon as possible. We had only accepted students from the Nepton and Sukuna regions so far, but we were planning to invite students from two more regions by the end of the year. Nepton and Sukuna had only received early access due to their generous contributions. Favoritism may be bad, but differentiation was necessary.

“I imagine you are all tired from the journey today. We have prepared the bath for you, and afterward, there will be a delicious meal waiting.”

While the bath may not be as relaxing as Sukuna’s hot springs, I was confident in the dinner. Especially because Chef Yacoo was cooking tonight.

Several days had passed since the first exchange students had arrived. Finally, all the political welcome events had calmed down and so now the wait was over. It was time to show them our pride and joy, the reason why they had come all this way, the Territory Reform Promotion Office's laboratory.

The laboratory had started out as a small hut housing Sacula's convicts. After remodeling, building annexes, and conducting various experiments, it had turned into a truly magnificent brick building. So magnificent that it could no longer be considered a punishment for the criminals to live inside. Some might even say it was as impressive a building as the count's mansion.

But while it looked extraordinary on the outside, the laboratory within mainly produced very ordinary things such as new drugs, various alloys, improved model planes, power engines, batteries, light bulbs, and balloons. Occasionally something exploded, but most experiments were quite mundane. It was only once we had completed the finished product that we could sometimes have flashy presentations. But in general, technological advancement was a mundane, repetitive process.

For our three visiting students, we had prepared a comparatively lively presentation. Much like the renowned king of inventors of my past life, we showed off our most awe-inspiring products. For instance, there was the vacuum bulb. Its bright light left a big impression.

After obtaining sulfur and processing it into sulfuric acid, we had managed to develop a battery capable of providing electricity, which allowed us to advance into the realm of electrical technology. Sulfuric acid was truly versatile.

Based on a smattering of knowledge from my past life, sulfuric acid was an essential component of industrialization, and the scale of its consumption was a rough indication of a country's industrial power. Apparently, you could also synthesize sulfuric acid by refining petroleum, which showed just how important fossil fuels were to mankind's development. In other words, this world was doomed.

While I was pining for fossil fuels, the laboratory head Reina explained the upcoming experiment. It would no doubt leave an even stronger impression

than the light bulb. Once you had mastered electricity to a certain degree, a new world of possibilities opened up. For example, materials obtained from electrolysis.

Since it was too dangerous to hold the next demonstration inside, we moved outside. When the exchange students stepped out of the laboratory, they found Hermes and some other staff members excitedly running around the area.

“Hermes, are you ready?”

“I just attached the battery to the propeller. The hydrogen is filled up. We just need to check if the ‘collar’ is properly tied—” Before Hermes could finish his sentence, the staff members who had been tinkering with a dog-sized object gave the all-clear. “Preparations are complete, sir.” Hermes concluded his report seriously, albeit with clear excitement upon his face.

He had performed this test multiple times already, but he still seemed to enjoy it as much as the first time. Hermes’s excitement was infectious; I could not help but smile too. I turned to the three students. “Enjoy the presentation! This prototype is our laboratory’s pride and joy! Chief Reina, please start!”

The lab staff were carrying an object shaped like a grain of rice beneath which a square box was attached. In my past life, people would have referred to it as an “airship.”

“We will now begin the test flight of the prototype airship!” On Lady Reina’s orders, one of them started fiddling with the box under the rice grain-shaped structure. They were connecting the battery to the motor’s conducting wire. The motor, in turn, was connected to the propeller, which generated propulsive force by catching the wind. While it was not all that powerful, the propulsion force let the airship, which was capable of floating on its own, fly.

Finally, they let it free. The airship began to float through the winds like a ship would the sea. In place of a paddle, its propeller pushed it across the cloudy waves. At first slowly, then steadily faster. While it did meet with some turbulence, it was clear to everyone watching: the airship was majestically soaring across the sky.

The staff members who had already seen it several times were still smiling with a sense of accomplishment. The students watching it for the first time

gasped in surprise with widened eyes. All their gestures were venerating the boy obsessed with airplanes.

“Tsk, if the last experiment had been a success, I may have been able to show them an airplane instead of an airship,” said the subject of their veneration, greedily smacking his lips. The bashful boy was wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He tried his best to keep up a happy face, but his smile melted as quickly as spring snow. Besides, he was talking much faster than usual. “Ah, I know, I know. Those students are our precious guests. We can’t have a prototype engine blow up in their faces.”

“You are not wrong there.”

“In that regard, the airship’s a safe bet. Even if it caught on fire, it would only startle people at that size. Maybe I should make some smaller engines for test runs,” Hermes mumbled to himself.

“Are you not already working on an improved engine? The bigger the product, the longer it takes to make.” I smiled and tapped his shoulder. The students were still young and would be with us for some time to come. There would be more than ample opportunity to show them. “Besides, look at them.”

The students’ surprise gradually turned to excitement and they started frolicking together with the other staff members. Not only the more emotive Arun, but even Lady Seire, the reconnaissance specialist, and Lady Medie, who had been raised by a diplomat, were celebrating as if they had completely forgotten their status.

“None of them will be saying that humans cannot fly anymore,” I said.

“True.” Hermes gazed at the spectacle he had created not just as a researcher but as a dreamer. In the past, his outlook had been so distant that could not even see his own feet, but now he was focused on the people in front of his eyes. “We’ve come a long way.”

“We have.”

The airship flying at a low altitude carried with it a lot of potential. Unlike the tendon-powered model plane, if you increased its size, it would be possible to

carry passengers. Of course, not without danger. As it was filled with hydrogen, a single spark could cause a large fire. Helium would be safer, but that was difficult to produce. In contrast, hydrogen could be obtained simply by running electricity through water.

Either way, the airship technology would allow me to reach the mysterious meeting place mentioned by that voice after my battle with the treants. Whether I would travel in a propeller plane or an airship depended on Hermes. Reaching that place by land would have been near impossible, but I could manage somehow with an aircraft.

Maybe I did not really have to go there. My only reason was that I had apparently received a paranormal communication from a demon. I had no real evidence, but I felt like I had to go.

While I was absorbed in my thoughts, the airship's test flight had ended. Lady Reina and Hermes were explaining the airship's concept to the students. Just when I was about to join them, Belgo approached me with one hand raised.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing important, just something I wanted you to know." Belgo and the other prisoner who had been helping us from the start had become full-fledged engineers and members of staff. Their achievements had earned them a reduced sentence. The compost production and farming experiments had been entrusted to newly arrived prisoners, while Belgo and his crew were in charge of supervision and more specialized tasks.

"I talked to my old friends..." Belgo was referring to the people living in the city's slums. They were operating in a legal gray zone—or rather a dark zone outside the law because it was impossible to go after every criminal. Besides, those people were a necessary evil as they maintained some order in an area neglected by law enforcement.

I had met with their boss several times. My first impression was that Chef Yacoo seemed much scarier. Be that as it may, Belgo had brought me some news from Itsutsu's dark side.

"Seems there've been some outsiders loitering around."

“Do you mean people from outside Sacula?”

Belgo nodded. Since the slum leaders were letting me know, the outsiders must have been different from the refugees we’d been receiving.

“They pop up here and there, then suddenly vanish. And then after a while, another one shows up.”

“Interesting.” I should pay the boss another visit. I asked Belgo to let his friends know I would repay their intel with a bottle of liquor. Of course, Belgo would also get a liquid stipend.

“Sir Fenix.” Lady Seire slid into the conversation as if she had been waiting for our information exchange to end—which she most definitely had.

“My apologies for leaving you alone. What do you think of the Promotion Office’s research?”

“I am in awe. I didn’t think life could be this full of surprises, but I’ve been proven wrong several times a day since coming here. Or rather since leaving Sukuna.” She sounded a little tired but content. “I’ve spent less than ten days in Itsutsu and I’ve already experienced more than I can fit into a letter to my grandfather.”

“I am sorry to increase your workload. But it also makes me proud to hear.” Her wonderment was a testament to the Promotion Office’s extraordinary talent. I was glad to hear it.

“If you don’t mind, Sir Fenix, could you help me choose what to include in the letter?”

“With pleasure,” I immediately replied. Lady Seire was very kindly implying that the House of Sukuna would arrange its priorities in line with the House of Sacula’s wishes. At least officially.

“I would start with detailing the engineering advancements necessary to improve and maintain the transportation network,” I continued. Easy access between regions would not only facilitate trade with Sacula, but it was essential to a vacation spot like Sukuna.

“Okay...” A hint of childlike naivete blushed over her beautiful face. Usually,

she made an effort to appear as mature as possible, but she could not hide her slight disappointment over her first letter merely discussing stones and roads. However, her expert training kicked back in. As if to scold herself, Lady Seire lightly shook her head and smiled. “I will gladly write to my grandfather about the pleasant and comfortable carriage ride over the paved road.”

“Thank you. To be honest, the light bulb and airship will not be ready for wider use for a while,” I disclosed while scratching my cheek awkwardly.

“That is unfortunate. Especially the flying ship. I’m sure I will dream about that tonight.”

“That sounds like a nice dream,” I replied sincerely.

“And someday it will come true.”

Lady Reina talked in a carrying voice while showing us around the laboratory. “Unlike other locations with similar machinery, we pride ourselves on precision.”

“What do you mean?” Lady Seire asked as a representative of the students.

“We don’t allow our staff to guess sizes by eye,” she answered while displaying a ruler and protractor. “These are standard for our lab. If I’m ordering a certain length or angle, I want the measurements to be exact. With as little error as possible. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to manufacture machines like that.” Her gaze fell upon the small-scale steam engine. Our budget was not large enough to keep building them at full size, so we went with smaller models for demonstrations. But they still worked properly. “That is a steam engine. A type of engine that generates power to move objects. Please watch.”

Prompted by Lady Reina’s nod, the laboratory staff placed a lid over the hole from which steam was escaping. Without a moment’s delay, the pressure inside started to rise. In its attempt to escape, the steam pushed the piston up, which rotated the shaft and thus the wheel it had been attached to.

“We attached a wheel as a visual demonstration, but it is possible to use the generated force in different ways. You could use it for the spiral movements of a drill or simple pushing motions. Of course, you can also use it to move the

wheels of a horse carriage.”

We had considered picking up the exchange students in the steam car but, due to the increase in crime, we had decided against it. An accident would have been no laughing matter.

The three students approached the engine to observe its intricate movements. Even from a distance, I could tell that this version had become more complex yet again.

“Creating a triple expansion engine at that size...our steam engine team sure is paying attention to detail...”

“He he, didn’t expect that, did you, Ash?” Rockel, the leader of the team who had prepared the model, boasted upon hearing my praises. He was our resident steam engine enthusiast.

“It is impressive, but why did it need a triple expansion engine?”

“Didn’t Hermes’s internal combustion engine blow up recently? I thought that maybe we might end up using the steam engine for the plane, so I just played around a little.”

“Hermes will get mad if he hears you.” The laboratory’s vice-chief Hermes thought that steam engines were lame. He was infatuated with the internal combustion engine, especially the radial engine. Of course, he also wanted to use it for his airplane, since it matched his ideal image. As a result, according to Lady Reina, he was constantly fighting with Rockel. *Our big sis has got it rough.*

“When I told him a while ago, we got into a fight.” Our laboratory had great open communication. There was no gossiping, but also no holding back.

“Don’t fight too much. I don’t want Chief Reina to worry even more.”

“Ha ha, that’s not too convincing coming from you.” *What do you mean? I’m on her side.* We were both in management, so I fully understood her struggles. I tried to reduce her burdens as much as possible.

“The other day, Chief Reina complained about drowning in work. How much did you put on her shoulders?”

“Hm, let me see...” Developing the new weapon, building the new stronghold

to deploy the weapons, and taking care of the students. Those were the main big tasks. Also, the practical applications of the steam engine and the development of the internal combustion engine, but she had been working on those for a while. The agricultural division had been mostly taken over by Lady Suiren. *Oh, right.* The transport network. The construction itself was outside the research lab's jurisdiction, but I had asked them for engineering feedback. The urban redevelopment was mainly handled by Mrs. Rihn; the lab staff were merely advisors...

As I was counting her responsibilities on my fingers, Rockel adopted a serious look on his face. "Ash, Chief Reina may be extremely talented, but even she has her limits."

"I know. I am filtering all business procedures through the Promotion Office before they go to the research laboratory." I made sure that no unnecessary information or direct negotiations ended up on her desk. I had to soften those blows, or she would eventually just collapse.

"Leaving her neither alive nor dead..."

"Who would do something so troubling?"

"I was just talking to myself. Look, it seems Chief Reina is on the move." He was right. She had finished her explanation of the model engine and invited the students to go see the real deal.

"Well, Rockel, good luck further improving the steam engine."

After seeing the large steam engine operating the lathe and drill press at the workshop, the three students asked if those machines were really necessary. *Of course they are.*

"What would you do back home in your region if you wanted to create something like this?" I asked while showing a fluted iron drill that had been cut by the drill press. The students thought for a while.

"Ask a skilled blacksmith?" Lady Medie replied in a quiet voice, aware of the task's difficulty.

"Yes, that is one way. But what if you needed one hundred or two hundred within a month?"

“Hm...do you know, Arun?”

“If we employed more people at a local blacksmith’s atelier it might work...” he answered, “but there would probably be some duds among the batch.” *That’s right.* The same would apply to most conventional ateliers.

“Let us take a look at how this pipe gets made then.”

It was simple. First, you had to prepare a cast iron rod, which you secured with a vise attached to the drill press. Then you started up the steam engine until it howled, and the drill pushed into the iron pipe. As a result, it created holes proportionate to the drill’s size. Next, you change the drill bit to a tool capable of cutting the flute and once again engage the steam engine. You would also usually dribble some oil onto the iron to reduce the friction while cutting, but those were the basics.

“A skilled blacksmith could perform the same work by hand. However, if you learn how to use this machine, even a lesser blacksmith could produce items of the same quality.” The machine effectively reduced the training period. It still didn’t completely eliminate defective goods, but it did not require nearly the same amount of skill.

“No matter how refined a tool is, you will be limited if you only have one. Especially when it comes to weapons. Even the greatest sword will eventually break.” I would much rather have ten pitchforks than one excellent sword. *The pitchforks could take care of both farm work and demons.*

It seemed that the students were still not convinced as to why you needed such a bizarre and complex machine to perform a task that could be achieved through manual labor. But they would gradually come to understand. In an emergency, these machines would show their true potential. Not that I wished for such an emergency.

Seire’s Perspective

One month after coming to Sacula, Sir Fenix organized a welcome party for us. Perfect timing. We had started to grow accustomed to the city, had met some of its people, and were not as nervous as we had been when we first

arrived. After all the formal official gatherings, I was happy to attend a party in a relaxed setting.

It was held at the renowned “Cinnamon’s Light.” The restaurant was not just famous in Sacula, but it also had somewhat of a reputation in Sukuna as well. Our spies had come across it while looking into Sir Fenix’s activities. Their report had concluded that it served extremely delicious food.

Sukuna spies had compiled a top secret, unofficial restaurant guide for every region. In that guide, “Cinnamon’s Light” was given the highest rank of five stars, putting it on the same level as the fancy restaurants in the royal capital.

“Lady Seire, you seem to be in a great mood today.” Lady Medie had picked up on my excitement.

“I heard about this place back home. I can’t wait to try some of their heavenly dishes,” I explained while hiding my embarrassed smile with my hands.

“Oh, if you say so, then it must indeed be good. They say that those of the House of Sukuna only eat at the best restaurants.”

As expected from a diplomat’s daughter, she knew of Sukuna’s reputation. In a way, it was a testament to our spies’ abilities that people were saying that our house knew where to find the best food. We were very much in the know.

“It seems that they have a lot of exotic menu items at ‘Cinnamon’s Light.’ Another thing to look forward to. Although I didn’t recognize many of the dishes served at the exchange student residence’s cafeteria either.”

“Yeah, the food here in Sacula is exquisite. That alone makes the trip worth it already.”

While we laughed, I looked over at the other guests. Sir Fenix had invited quite a few of his acquaintances. In other words, there was a wide range of different people. Among them was Mother Yae, a priestess born of the House of Sacula; her partner Sir George, a young military leader; Mr. Quid, a rising merchant who held influence over many other houses; the young artisans who were working for Sir Fenix; Chief Reina, the head of the laboratory; Vice-Chief Hermes, her deputy; and Mrs. Rihn, Chief Reina’s mother and the head waiting maid.

They were all people whom I had met and interacted with more closely as a student. But there were also some of Sir Fenix's former classmates who worked in the city or just happened to be here right now.

"Suiren, I almost didn't see you. Do you have time to talk?" A former classmate of Ash called out to Lady Suiren, who was in charge of the agricultural department.

However, it was Sir Glen who replied. "Saia, you came!"

"Hey, Glen! I just came to the city to do some shopping and drop by the lab. Had to get some input on a farming situation we have back at our village while I'm here anyway," the man named Saia explained. "Then they invited me to this party, and of course, I'm not going to turn down a free meal!"

"You just came for the food? I know it's supposed to be casual, but it's still in honor of our exchange students."

"Is it? You mean the people over there?" Saia pointed in our direction. Medie and I simultaneously bowed, which prompted him to straighten himself and bow in return.

"My apologies, I haven't properly introduced myself. I am Saia, the Sarura village chief's eldest son. Although that probably doesn't mean much to someone from outside of Sacula. Just consider me one of Sir Fenix's former classmates."

"Pleased to meet you. I am Seire from the House of Sukuna."

"I am Medie Raino, in the service of Baron Nepton. It is a pleasure to meet you. Over there is Arun Argos. He has also been sent here from our region."

As we exchanged greetings, I noticed that Mr. Saia's manner had changed. While he had spoken very casually with Sir Glen, clearly he could display proper etiquette when necessary. Given that he had received a formal education, that may have been obvious, but I knew many people who were incapable of doing so. Especially when caught off guard.

"I couldn't help but overhear that you were having some trouble with your farms?"

“Yes, our pulse crops have been damaged, but we don’t know if it was caused by insects or something else. So I wanted to ask for some advice.”

“Oh, I see. I wasn’t aware that Lady Sui ren is also in charge of dealing with problems like that.”

“It is just easier to research things at Itsutsu’s temple library. Besides, if it turns out that other villages are having similar problems, it might be affecting the entire region.”

“That makes sense. You may know what’s going on in your village, but not the ones further away. Whereas Lady Sui ren can just gather the data at the lab...”

It was clear that she could help them deal with their problems much more efficiently. If there were insect pests, they could try and limit damages with an early harvest, even if that entailed some losses. I would have loved to use the same strategy for Sukuna, but I was doubtful if all our villages had the necessary capabilities.

“Isn’t it difficult to report a problem like that?”

“It certainly isn’t easy. At first, you’re not sure how exactly to report it, and the farmers generally don’t bother seeking advice for something they consider a minor abnormality. It took a lot of work to get used to this way of doing things.” Apparently, Saias had patrolled the fields and talked to each farmer every single day. I admired his tenacity.

“That’s a lot of work. Well done.”

“I am one of Sir Fenix’s former classmates after all. I might not be as efficient as Hermes or Reina, but this is the least I can do.” I sensed that he was hiding his enormous competence behind his modest words. In recent years, there had been such a significant increase in Sacula’s agricultural productions that there was no way it could have been due to Sir Fenix’s efforts alone. He had established the research lab, sure, but its agricultural division was putting in a lot of work. As were people like Mr. Saias in every village. No wonder there was such a visible upward trend. But he wasn’t done talking.

“Besides, if I report it to the lab, they will file it. So I feel like I have to do it.” Was documenting really that important? Sure, certain documents had

significant value. I knew that full well as someone who dealt with information. But did that also apply to agriculture?

“Why do you feel like you have to do it?” I asked.

“That is a valid question,” Mr. Saias replied with a faint smile. “It takes a lot of time and effort, and they will not be of much use for the next ten, twenty years. But when I was researching agriculture at the library, I wished there would have been more detailed records that could help our village. Accessing past data would have made things much easier.”

I had never read any books about agriculture, but according to Mr. Saias they were quite vexing. The air and the earth differed by region, and by season. And they changed yearly. Plus, there were different types of crops and multiple ways to farm them.

“I prayed more than once that I would stumble upon an entry detailing how to farm a specific crop, in our village’s specific conditions, using the specific methods available to us.” In the end, he hadn’t found any. So he spent days trying out any method he found based on the most similar data. “Luckily, there was similar data, at least. I know some people who couldn’t find anything, and all their crops withered during their first experiments.”

I was speechless. I felt for those people. And I understood now why he wanted to keep better records. To make it easier for someone in the future.

“As I said before, even though it takes a lot of time and effort, it probably won’t be of much use for the next few decades. But one hundred or two hundred years from now, I’m sure somebody will look at it. Somebody praying to find the right data, just like how we desperately flipped through the records of the ancient civilization.”

“Especially when it comes to crop blight and insect pests.” I remembered hearing that those menaces tended to resurface every few decades when everyone had forgotten about them. Anyone facing such a disaster would pray for hints from the past.

“Maybe it’s better if the data won’t be needed. But Ash—Sir Fenix said that even in that case, somebody will still be looking for the records, so it won’t be completely useless.”

“What did he mean?”

“That people would definitely want it as historical data. For agricultural history, life history, and climate history. In that regard, the agricultural records would be treasure troves for future researchers. So I’m currently working on storing that treasure away for people a hundred years in the future,” Mr. Saias declared with a bright grin. It resembled Sir Fenix’s smile a little.

In confronting his village’s farming issues, he extended his arms without any hesitation one hundred years into the future—the same future that my respected grandfather had claimed he could not predict. *Can you believe it, grandfather? How many gifted people do they have here?* It appeared that the genius girl from Nepton standing next to me felt the same.

None of Sir Fenix’s close acquaintances looked down on me because of my young age or gender. Without a doubt, they were treating me so kindly and offering to help wherever they could because I was Sir Fenix’s guest. Either way, I was thoroughly enjoying my time in this foreign region.

Suddenly, Arun’s loud voice reached my ears. It appeared that his conversation with the restaurant’s poster girl had shifted to the topic of Sir Fenix. As I approached them, I felt Lady Maika’s gaze. Was she monitoring this entire floor?

“May I join you? Your conversation piqued my interest,” I interjected, signaling to Lady Maika that I had no ulterior motives. It turned out they had been talking about corrupt government officials. Around Sir Fenix, the world may have felt like the meadow of the gods, but unfortunately that was not the case.

“Yeah, that was pretty bad...” Lady Maika reminisced while munching on her Hamburg steak. “The officials conspired with a company to charge money for equipment they never delivered and sell stuff that they kept for maintenance. Ash got really mad when he heard how much they had pocketed.”

They managed to anger Sir Fenix? After hearing Lady Maika’s recount of the incident, Sir Fenix forced a faint smile. I couldn’t imagine what he looked like angry.

“You know that a lot of our lab staff are former prisoners, right? Most of them got caught stealing because they didn’t have enough money for food. Ash told those officials that if they had used all that embezzled money to distribute free lunches or create simple jobs instead, our staff wouldn’t have needed to resort to crime.”

Okay, I get it. Sir Fenix and I felt a different type of anger toward corruption. To me, more or less most government officials were like that. And as a member of a noble family, I wasn’t shocked by the amount stolen either. But Sir Fenix came at it from another perspective. To someone who had been born in a poor village and lived among commoners, that money signified the difference between life and death. Thus it had angered the gentle Sir Fenix.

“What did Sir Fenix do then?”

“Back then, we were still enrolled at the academy, so he reported it to one of the maids. When he learned that the culprits would only face light punishment, he went to negotiate with my uncle.” Her uncle being the Acting Count Lord Itsuki...the leader of the regional government.

“Ash had heard from Belgo and his friends about life in the slums, how much money they had to live on, and how they got caught. So he started explaining all that to my uncle. Told him that the former prisoners had only stolen enough to afford food for the day, whereas the officials had embezzled a hundred times more! It was a very passionate speech.”

That sounded very much like Sir Fenix. Even in his anger, he first gathered data so as to explain the situation objectively. If he had been born into the House of Sukuna, he would have made an excellent spy.

“Did the officials receive a more severe punishment then?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not that easy to change the law. The punishment itself was pretty minor...” Lady Maika sighed while continuing to chew her Hamburg steak. Even her favorite food couldn’t diminish her feelings of regret. “But my uncle took it seriously, so he started giving the culprits the cold shoulder whenever they tried to interact with him as a punishment instead. He also put in place new penalties, so next time the embezzler won’t be let off so easily!”

“I’m glad to hear that Sir Fenix’s effort bore fruit.” However, the phoenix

himself brushed it aside as if it were no big deal. “So if Lord Itsuki is giving them the cold shoulder at work, does that mean the culprits are still in Itsutsu?” Lady Maika confirmed my suspicions with a nod. *I think I can be of some help here. Someone needs to take care of Sir Fenix’s enemies.*

Lady Maika hesitated for a moment after I asked for their names, but eventually looked to Sir Fenix. “What were their names again?”

“Manera and Doruo,” he replied.

Time to gather some information on those two.

If someone had asked me who in Sacula had the most contact with the outside, I would have to answer the Quid company. Making good use of his close relationship with me, Mr. Quid was the first in line to get his hands on our newest technology and then sell it in other regions. As a result, the Quid company had customers in the upper echelons across the kingdom.

It was said that all it took to draw the attention of local nobles and politicians was to approach a city gate with a Quid company logo and announce that you were carrying new items from Sacula. You could even grab the notice of the region’s leader given the right circumstances.

The House of Sacula used the Quid company merchants as unofficial diplomats. I, too, had used Mr. Quid as a messenger to arrange the student exchange. So there was perhaps no better merchant than Mr. Quid, who had met all three students and was fully aware of their situation, to help choose a souvenir that they could send back home along with their report letters. Or rather, I did not know any good alternatives.

At first glance, the three students may have seemed like regular young visitors, but they were our guests of honor—the sons and daughters of prominent figures from other regions, capable of shaping not just Sacula’s but every frontier region’s future. I was certain that Mr. Quid would instruct his employees to provide top-class customer service the moment he noticed us approaching his shop. However, I was not so confident with other stores. In the worst-case scenario, it could lead to a diplomatic incident.

“My apologies for asking such a sudden favor.” I felt it prudent to apologize for barging in with such important customers without any prior notice. The students were going to send their letters tomorrow, and their requests for a souvenir had come up this morning. Mr. Quid just smiled elegantly.

“Not a problem at all. It is a normal business day, so we are prepared for any customer. It is our duty to provide the best service at all times.” A reply befitting a successful businessman. Then, abruptly, he smirked much like he had back when he was a youthful peddler. “After all, today’s peasant brat could be tomorrow’s noble knight.”

Are you talking about me?

“You taught me to never look down upon any buyers. I’m truly lucky to have you as a customer. Plus, you spend a lot of money.” The former peddler laughed.

The exchange students were rummaging the shelves stocked with Sacula specialty products. Lady Medie bought a dozen bottles of distilled liquor, Lady Seire chose the Noscula skin crème, and Arun went for the preserved foods. Their purchases reflected their different personalities and interests.

Since I was involved in the development of all those items, I provided some additional information on them, much to their delight. It appeared that their letters had just gotten longer yet again. *And I can keep going if you want—my rants are free!*

As I was enjoying myself in the role of shop assistant, Mr. Quid approached me. “By the way, was everything all right with the letter from the capital?”

“Yes, everything is perfect. Thank you for helping me keep in touch with my friend.” The other day, the Quid company caravan had returned from the capital and brought back a package from the delinquent priest, Father Folke. As usual, it was mostly filled with heavy transcripts.

According to the letter, he had managed to further decipher the ancient alphabet. Judging from his brush strokes, he must have been extremely excited. I had become used to his terrible handwriting, but this time, even I had trouble reading it.

It seemed that the reason he had been stuck for so long was the proper nouns for the three gods: Monkey God, Wolf God, and Dragon God. Father Folke had worked with the assumption that their names had stayed the same over the centuries, but things just had not added up. He probably should have come to the conclusion that one of the names was wrong earlier, but the fact that two out of the three had indeed remained unchanged complicated matters.

Father Folke wrote that recently, after reaching yet another impasse, he had come to that realization while recounting his time in Sacula to the brats at the orphanage. All of a sudden, he had remembered a conversation with a cocky, upstart brat from just before he had left the region for the capital.

He mentioned roughly a dozen times how glad he was that he remembered our conversation where I had mentioned that occasionally certain gods absorbed other gods' functions over time. A little theological titbit from my past life.

Father Folke had thus considered the possibility that the three gods could have gone by different names in the past. After reassembling all the puzzle pieces, he had started deciphering anew, which led him to the conclusion that the Dragon God had a different name in the past and served a different purpose. The third god mentioned in the ancient texts was the phoenix. An immortal being that led humanity by handing them the wisdom of the Monkey God and the strength of the Wolf God.

Doesn't that sound too good to be true, Sir Phoenix? he had teased me in the letter. Even though I had never voluntarily picked the phoenix as my emblem.

Ever since then, he had continued making slow progress in deciphering the texts. Since the three gods' depiction was completely different from the Church's modern doctrine, it was still difficult to translate. *They weren't really worshiped as gods. They were some sort of mysterious entities that entrusted their hopes to children and friends,* Father Folke had written in bewilderment.

He had also graciously sent me parts of his research notes and the text that he had deciphered so far. But strangely, I was unable to read them. His research notes were relatively well-organized and even if some sections were difficult to understand, I still managed to get the general meaning. Nonetheless, when I

picked up the copy of the ancient text, I could not read it. There was an inexplicable mental block as soon as I tried to understand the ancient language.

I should have been able to read it, yet I could not. Maybe my brain was impaired. Some sort of language disorder. After all, I had suffered my fair share of blows to the head. That was the easy explanation. But I had another growing suspicion.

The mental block resembled the feeling I had experienced when the mysterious cartographic information appeared in my mind after defeating the treants. I was growing increasingly confident that there must have been some sort of link between me and the demons. The fact that my senses felt sharper, and I recovered faster than usual whenever I defeated a demon, only further proved my point.

Not that any of this really changed my plans. At most, it prompted me to prioritize the development of an airplane. But that was already part of my plans anyway. In other words, everything was business as usual.

The parcel from the capital also contained a cute, elegant envelope that most definitely did not come from the delinquent priest. Her Highness Princess Alicia had sneaked in a letter. The only virtue I could ascribe to that foulmouthed priest was the fact that he provided a cover to facilitate communications with Lady Alicia.

The princess's letter had been written with a lively stroke of the brush. Even before reading its contents, I could tell that my good friend was in a good mood. I smiled unconsciously.

It appeared that since Lady Alicia had taken measures to improve the sanitary conditions at the arena's medical bay, she had grown in popularity with the Church. Since all the doctors and medical technicians who had been present that day, including Mr. Lusus, were members of the intellectual class, they held some influence over the Church. As such, they spread rumors to improve her reputation, which had previously been sullied by a certain marquis.

Lady Alicia was an incredibly talented woman. She just needed an opportunity to prove herself. I imagined she did not have much difficulty getting along with the scholarly minds of the temple. In addition, she had the backing of Father

Folke. I was not sure how helpful that connection was, but supposedly he enjoyed a fairly good reputation in the Church. Not that I believed it.

As a result, I can help you even more now! Lady Alicia had concluded in her letter. Her kindness was truly dazzling. I had not yet sent my reply, but I had reiterated my willingness to repay her kindness however I could. If she were ever in trouble, she should contact me, and I would help right away. Conversely, I also would not hesitate to ask for her help. I had made that decision a long time ago.

Thus I finished summarizing the contents of the letters to Mr. Quid, who did not know either one of the senders. Of course, I had to keep certain parts a secret. The former peddler seemed to enjoy listening to my summary. Without any warning, he casually broached a different subject.

“By the way, I received some news about the Gochie company from one of my merchants,” he interjected. He had a tendency to abruptly break news like that without any regard for his surroundings or the flow of conversation. “It seems that they received a large delivery for the first time in a while. Maybe something rare.”

“A large delivery for that company? That would indeed be the first in a long time.” Recently, they had been unable to properly conduct their business. My fault. The Gochie company had conspired with the two corrupt officials Manera and Doruo who had been the topic of the day during the exchange students’ welcome party.

In order to deal with the corruption, I had taken measures to destabilize the company to a point where it would almost certainly go bankrupt in a few years. It should not have been in any condition to get large deliveries. Besides, I had not heard any reports of them recovering. Mr. Quid was letting me know in a roundabout way that some filthy scoundrels were planning something bad.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t met anyone from the Gochie company recently. Maybe I should go send them my regards.” I was letting Mr. Quid know that I understood his warning. He then included an extra bottle of distilled liquor for free.

Seire's Perspective

A stroll through the city further confirmed my perception that the Sacula region was indeed very safe. It was not rare to see women walking by themselves without hiding their faces or moving at a quick pace. They were just leisurely going for a stroll. In terms of safety, Sacula rivaled, and possibly even surpassed, Sukuna, which, as a sightseeing region, put considerable effort into maintaining public order.

It was no wonder that even I, an exchange student from another region, was allowed to explore on my own. Well, except for the personal guards walking a few steps behind me. I turned into a narrow back alley. To my surprise, it was just as clean as the main streets. My spies had told me that the Territory Reform Promotion Office was putting forth an effort to clean the streets, but I hadn't expected it to include back alleys too.

With streets this clean, accidental fires caused by random litter were probably few and far between. *I wonder if we can achieve this same level of cleanliness in Sukuna*, I pondered while walking further down the alley. It wouldn't be easy. First, we'd have to dress in old but clean clothes to negotiate with the back-alley dwellers.

At that moment, a back-alley dweller blocked my way. "Stop right there, missus. Nothin' interesting to see past this point. If you don't want trouble—"

"Great! You showed up earlier than expected." I got straight to the point. "Could you take me to your boss? According to my intel, it's a man named Rohko. Is that still the case?"

The slum dweller who had come to give me a friendly warning was stumped by my sudden request. "Hold on a minute. I didn't see that comin'..."

"I understand. But I don't have much free time, so could you please hurry?"

"You've got some guts. Guess the young master doesn't have normal friends."

The "young master" must have been Sir Fenix. According to my informants, Sir Fenix had made arrangements with the boss of this slum to provide jobs for its inhabitants. As a result of that connection, even an outsider like me could safely walk down this alley. I had made sure to send word to the criminals that

one of his friends would be visiting their abode. Thus, this man had most likely been sent out to ensure my safety by blocking my path.

“I still don’t know what’s happenin’ but you say you’re not lost? You come to talk to the boss, missus?”

“Yes. As you may already know, my name is Seire Sukuna. I am currently looking for information on the officials Manera and Doruo. I think your boss may be able to help.”

“Normally, I’d say that’s none of your business...” The man clicked his tongue. He didn’t even bother hiding his annoyance. “But word is you’re the young master’s guest. I don’t know if I can just turn you away. Eh, I’m just a scrub. Come, I’ll ask the boss.”

“Is that boy you keep mentioning Sir Fenix?”

“Who else?” he sneered, as if it were obvious. The man who called himself a “scrub” seemed to think of Sir Fenix as a benefactor. Then he remembered that there was someone else who could also be called by that title. “Oh, the count’s son, I suppose,” he muttered under his breath. “I’ll make an exception for your guards too, but only today. Just don’t do anything stupid. We’re not really hot for a fight with guards and knights.”

“I imagine. Here is the toll.” I handed the scrub a few coins.

“You’re not just a pretty face, eh.”

“I am a Sukuna.” Of course, I didn’t expect a commoner to know what each noble family was known for. Renowned for its reconnaissance skills, the House of Sukuna didn’t raise entirely pure, innocent girls. At the very least, they taught us some underhanded tricks. I felt a little nervous since this was my first time bribing someone outside of Sukuna. So I followed my teachers’ advice: when in doubt, just show a pretty smile.

“Better someone who knows her way ’round than a pure little princess, I guess. Our boss is pretty busy. If he can’t see you today, make sure to get lost.”

“I understand that I’m not at home. I won’t force anything.”

“Splendid.”

Was the slum boss really that busy? I couldn't even begin to imagine what his life looked like. I was still a pretty sheltered girl after all.

"Wait here." The scrub entered a house that looked as shabby as the others. I felt people staring at me from the windows of the surrounding dwellings. This was no doubt an important location. A short while later, the man opened the door.

"You're in luck, missus. The boss will see you. You don't have a weapon, do you?"

"Of course not." *That's a lie.* When push came to shove, I would brandish my gift bags full of coins, then reach for the chain whip hidden in my waistband. The House of Sukuna specialized in fighting in confined places. I didn't feel particularly threatened, but a little prudence was common sense for the daughter of a noble family.

Upon entering the house, I found myself in a room that matched the grubby outside. However, it became much cleaner as I moved further to the back. This may have been a slum, but the boss's base still looked quite nice. An old man was waiting for me in a lounge suite furnished with sofas and a table.

"Looks like you know my name already. No need for introductions then?"

"Indeed. It looks like Sir Fenix beat me to it."

"The young master always adheres to procedure. He has our respect. Although he still does things his own way." The old man faintly smiled. He radiated a strength that belied his age.

"Let me also adhere to procedure then." I placed a first bag of coins on the table. To show that there were more, I intentionally jingled the others.

"An introduction gift?"

"It may be a little on the nose, but unfortunately I only just arrived in the city, so I wasn't sure what else to bring."

"Don't worry. Better than bringing a dud," the old man reassured me before moving the conversation along. Seems like my first impression wasn't too bad. "I was told you wanted to ask me something. What do you want to know?"

“I want to know about Manera and Doruo. I did a little research, and it seems that you helped Sir Fenix deal with the Gochie company, which made its profits from working with the two corrupt officials.”

“Didn’t you say you only just arrived in the city?”

“Well, I am a Sukuna.”

Judging by the look of surprise on the experienced boss’s face, the House of Sukuna’s reconnaissance skills reigned supreme in the Sacula region too. What a relief. Even the mighty House of Sacula wasn’t all-powerful.

“All right, I get what you want. I might indeed be able to help you. But it depends. Why should I tell a young missus like you?”

Instead of a reply, I placed another bag of coins on the table, but the dignified old man shook his head.

“May sound odd coming from an outcast like me, but I’m still a Sacula resident and you’re not. Now, I’m not saying I won’t tell you because you’re not from ’round here, but...don’tcha think this is a bit too confidential for an outsider?”

“The solidarity of Sacula’s residents really is as strong as people always say.” But I hadn’t expected a slum dweller who enjoyed barely any legal protections from the government to fall into that category. I had miscalculated. I left the bag on the table as a fee for the lesson.

“We’ve been doing pretty well lately. Once you don’t have to worry about putting food on your table, you start thinking about stuff other than money.”

“That’s a valuable lesson. Is that also the work of Sir Fenix?”

“If it wasn’t for the young master, we wouldn’t be talking right now.”

How fascinating. It felt like Sir Fenix had a finger in every pie. While I had already known about his wide net of operations before coming here, it still took me by surprise. There was a difference between seeing it on paper and with your own eyes.

“Understood. I will tell you why I’m doing all this. Then you can decide for yourself whether to give me the information or send me back.” The boss jerked

his chin, urging me to go on. “On our way to Itsutsu, our carriage was ambushed by bandits.”

“I am sorry to hear that, but those were none of ours.”

“Don’t worry. Neither Sir Fenix nor I think so. Judging by the quality of their equipment and the fact that they ambushed a carriage of exchange students, we assume that they were sent by another noble house.” As soon as he heard the words “another noble house,” the old man’s facial expression changed. It seemed like he knew something.

“At present, Marquis Datara, one of the central nobles, is the most hostile toward the House of Sacula,” I continued. “The marquis seems to hold a grudge because of Sir Fenix’s soap recipe and his relationship with Her Highness.”

And that same Marquis Datara had gotten involved with the remote Yanga region. He had interfered in the fight for succession by fanning the flames of dissatisfaction and inciting an insurrection. A truly despicable guy. In the end, Viscount Yanga claimed the seat but was indebted to the marquis.

“It seems that Marquis Datara has been behaving quite hostile toward the region recently, sending refugees from Yanga this way. It also seems that Manera, Doruo, and the Gochie company have regained some influence after receiving the cold shoulder for a while.” I steered the topic back to the corrupt officials.

In retrospect, government officials could easily access the schedule of the exchange students’ carriage driving toward the city. I wondered if there was any correlation to the ambush. If there was, we had to properly take care of the problem. Unless we wanted Sacula to fall into chaos like the Yanga region, which had become quite unsafe following the improper transition of power. Apparently, their tax yields had remained the same despite the unrest, but only because they had raised the tax rates for those who remained. According to my intelligence, living conditions had become very harsh for the local population. In addition, the region was beholden to Marquis Datara.

In order to avert a similar fate for Sacula, I was currently gathering and analyzing information from all over the place. My efforts often led nowhere. But I didn’t shirk my responsibility just because the information might end up

being useless.

“I understand your motives, missus. But I want to ask one more question.”

“Please go ahead. I will answer as best as I can.”

“You are still an outsider. Why do you care so much about Sacula’s problems?”

An excellent question. This may have been a slum, but even so, you didn’t get to be at the top of an organization like his without any skills. I was strangely impressed.

“For three reasons.”

First, the House of Sukuna had allied with the House of Sacula to give Marquis Datar a good spanking with the soap recipe. So if the marquis harbored feelings of hostility against Sacula, it was our duty and privilege to stand beside them. If we shirked that responsibility, our mutual trust would crumble, and Marquis Datar would surely use that opening to crush both regions.

Second, among those regions who had joined the fight against Marquis Datar, Nepton currently appeared to be on even better terms with Sacula than our region. Thus I was doing my best to move us up a rank.

“Finally, and personally most importantly...” I leaned in and spoke with a hushed voice because I didn’t want everyone to hear. “Sir Fenix is a handsome and accomplished man, so I want to ingratiate myself a little with him. I am aware that there are strong and skillful women his age in Sacula too, but I want to give it a shot at least.” And if I didn’t catch his attention, that was fine too. I would find another handsome man.

“What I’m hearing is, you’ve come to find a husband?” the old man asked with half a smile.

“I’m looking to marry into someone else’s family to be precise. For a number of reasons, I didn’t find a fiancé back home. Even though I’m not a bad catch, if I dare say so myself.” *I don’t think I’m ugly and I make an effort to keep up a stylish appearance. Maybe I’m a bit fussy when it comes to my likes and dislikes...*

“Hm... In that case, I will cooperate. I may not look like it, but I’ve always had a weak spot for helping women,” he said with a broad grin.

Slum boss Rohko told me why they called Sir Fenix “young master.” Apparently it was not because he would become a part of the count’s family due to his relationship with Lady Maika. Sir Fenix’s way of doing things was quite similar to that of the slum gangs, so they considered him one of theirs. A “young master” capable of leading the next generation. Sir Fenix was a trusted friend to the slum dwellers.

“At first, I obviously didn’t take him seriously.” Rohko recounted his first meeting with the young master with a hint of nostalgia.

When some of the former slum dwellers who were currently working at the lab had told him that Sir Fenix wanted to talk, Rohko had accepted without much consideration. Sir Fenix seemed to be taking good care of the slum residents, so he might as well grant him an audience. Besides, that knight was still a youngster and Rohko a season slum criminal, so what could go wrong?

Naturally, Sir Fenix had pulled the rug out from under Rohko’s feet in the face of such a casual approach. It was Sir Fenix after all. And back then, he didn’t have any reputation in Sacula yet.

“I hadn’t expected him to be such a polite young gentleman. My men had told me he was a farmer’s boy. You can imagine my shock. Which only doubled when I got to know his personality.” Rohko grinned. It must have felt like watching a beautiful horse approach you, only to realize that it was on a rampage. And then getting kicked to the side.

“He was very composed coming here. Like you. And brought gifts too. A treat called a crepe. But you probably know that from Belgo already.”

Naturally, Rohko hadn’t eaten it in front of his guest. A present from a first-time visitor risked being poisoned. However, judging by the weight of the box, Rohko had realized that there must have been some money inside too, which changed his attitude a bit. It had been too heavy for someone who just wanted to do small talk.

“Of course, I didn’t think that the boy had hidden the money himself. I

assumed it was Belgo's doing."

"But he had done it himself?"

"I never confirmed it, but judging from the conversation that followed, it didn't seem like he needed anyone to teach him tricks like that."

"I need some people for a job," Sir Fenix had said after the initial greeting.

"Depends on what it is," Rohko had answered. Work was always welcome. As the slum's manager, it was Rohko's job to make sure his subordinates had enough food on their tables. A leader had to look out for his pack.

"I would like you to help me carry some boxes." Assuming regular manual work, Rohko had tentatively nodded in agreement. Most of the jobs offered to the slum dwellers were menial labor. Anyone capable of brainwork would not have ended up in the slums unless they were extraordinarily foolish or malicious.

Those menial jobs also tended to involve some roughhousing. Or to put it differently, people usually sought out Rohko for jobs that involved violating the law. However, the boss hadn't anticipated that the polite young gentleman would fall into that same category.

"I want you to carry the boxes from Gochie's storage house to the Quid company." Rohko's wry smile revealed that the young master's request had taken him completely by surprise. So much so that he had choked on his drink. *I probably would've reacted the same.*

The Gochie company and the youngster were seemingly unrelated. And while the Quid company may not have been a direct competitor, the two definitely weren't on good enough terms to simply share products with each other. So the request to "carry boxes" had essentially boiled down to "steal some products from the Gochie company."

And not just a few items from the storefront. It had sounded like he wanted to empty their entire warehouse. That was not the type of request Rohko had expected from a first-time visitor, especially not a youngster.

"What the hell do you want?" Rohko had shouted in a threatening voice in an

attempt to gloss over his confusion.

“There are two government officials called Manera and Doruo,” the youngster had continued in a calm voice. “They have been using military equipment to commit fraud. Falsely claiming that buying prices went up and overcharging for repairs. Bad stuff, right?” The boy had sought agreement from Rohko who also did quite a bit of “bad stuff” in his line of work.

“Upon investigating the bad stuff a bit closer, I discovered that a certain company was implicated in these crimes.” The Gochie company. Rohko had already known as much. When committing crimes like that, the upper class usually employed slum dwellers whom they could scapegoat afterward.

To Rohko, the Gochie company had been just another stingy client. For a brief moment, he had considered that this conversation might lead to his arrest, but that wouldn’t have squared with the young man’s earlier box-carrying request.

“The money that they stole from everyone’s taxes should be redistributed to the population. Lord Itsuki is furious that government officials embezzled all that money!”

“Lord Itsuki is furious?” Even the slum dwellers knew how passionate the Sacula family was. There was nothing like their fury.

“Unfortunately, the law is not equipped to deal them an appropriate punishment. It is quite difficult to prove malicious intent rather than mere negligence.” If someone broke a vase while cleaning, it was impossible to tell whether it happened on purpose or as an accident. And if you punished them too harshly for what could be a mistake, people might stop cleaning altogether. In order to strike the right balance, a lot of penalties ended up being fairly lenient.

“However, I do not think this can be classified as simple negligence. And if anyone were to accidentally lose that much money, they are certainly not fit for that job. It is also strange that the Gochie company did not notice anything. Unless they cannot do math. But then they probably should not be running a business.”

Upon hearing that the acting count was furious, Rohko had braced himself, but the youngster’s calm yet unrelenting speech had also sent shivers down his

spine. There may have been a wildfire in the distance, but a kitchen fire had been ignited right before his eyes.

“Not that I can right all the wrongs in this world by myself. I am sure it would not be easy to turn down a request from government officials. If only they had admitted to their wrongdoings... Unfortunately, they were not very smart. They offered me some pocket change, and when I refused, told me to watch my step at night.”

Seeing the youngster’s fake smile, Rohko had instantly exchanged looks with his close associates. They had previously worked with the Gochie company. If any of his underlings had accepted a request to beat up that boy, he would have to beat that person up instead.

There were certain people in the world who you just shouldn’t anger. They all had one common trait: their ferocity. Their strength manifested in different ways, but once you poked the hornet’s nest, there was no stopping their wrath.

Rohko had stopped looking down on the boy before his eyes as a mere brat. The Gochie company had poked the hornet’s nest, and as a result, he had sought out the slum boss with a heavy bag of coins. How far had he been willing to go?

“What is your name again?”

“Ash.”

“Okay, Ash. How many boxes do you want us to take out of the Gochie storage?”

“As many as you can carry.” Rohko’s suspicions had been proven right. Once angered, the boy had no intentions of holding back. “The military does not view the Gochie company favorably either, since they misappropriated government funds. It’s rumored that the Quid company will take over the Gochie routes, so I imagine they will have to replenish their stocks soon.”

Despite his anger, Ash had presented a perfectly organized plan. You really did not want to anger someone like him. In other words, he had ensured them that they wouldn’t be arrested for stealing from the Gochie company. And Mr. Quid had agreed to buy any surplus from the stolen goods. All the necessary

arrangements had been made.

The boy may have seemed like a polite young gentleman on the outside, but on the inside, he was a true monster.

“Killing someone in anger is nothing unusual. Even women and children can get caught up in the moment and lash out if they lose their cool. But he’s taking down an entire company. And he’s putting his money where his mouth is. Getting the military, another company, and an outlaw bunch like us on board... It’s incredible how much determination a small body like his can hold within it...”

On top of it all, the boy had prepared a deal that Rohko could not refuse.

“On an unrelated note, I have another proposal I would like to discuss while I am already here. They are still in the planning stages, but there are a couple of other projects for which I would like to request your help.” He had then laid out a plan for cultivating new land outside the city and a plan to clean up Itsutsu. “I will particularly be requiring regular help for the latter clean-up project over an extended period of time. By cleaning the city, I hope to decrease the spread of disease. According to my research at the temple, this should significantly improve sanitary conditions.”

Rohko hadn’t really understood the monster’s fervent sanitation speech, but he had taken note of his suggestion that would provide regular, long-term work for the slum residents. That would be a huge help. Rohko had also understood that this proposal acted as both a reward and threat to force him to accept the Gochie job.

Or to put it differently, it was a lure. If Rohko refused, another slum boss would accept instead, which could possibly lead to a shift in the slum’s power dynamics. The moment Rohko had sat down with the monster, he had already lost all bargaining power.

“Do you plan on choking the life out of Manera and Doruo? And Gochie?” Rohko had asked for confirmation. Casual death threats may have been omnipresent in the slums, but when it came to the real deal, he had to make sure.

“By no means! I would never choke the life out of them. I have just come to

tear off their limbs.” Sir Fenix had brushed it off with a smile.

Rohko’s account ended like a ghost story. *How intriguing!* The parts where Sir Fenix showed his rougher side especially struck a chord with me.

“He may look like a nice guy on the outside, but he has a twisted side to him.”

Yes, he’s very charming.

Thus, I had managed to obtain the information I was looking for. Of course, I couldn’t be sure of its veracity yet, but it was a good start.

As any further secret dealings would have surely aroused suspicion, I decided to play with open hands and report my findings to Sir Fenix even if most of it was still conjecture. Regardless, something was amiss, and I was sure he wouldn’t refuse my help if I offered it.

In my search for Sir Fenix, I ended up at the admin halls. Someone had seen him here, but I couldn’t find him nor hair. I asked a member of staff who sent me upstairs, but when I got there, I was informed that Sir Fenix had just gone back downstairs. Two similar interactions later, I had scoured the entire building and still not found him. *What a busy person...*

As I walked down a random corridor, I finally spotted Sir Fenix in the distance. Busy talking to a group of three knights. It sounded like they were about to go on patrol.

“It seems there has been a new influx of refugees from the Yanga region. Please take care of yourselves.”

“Don’t worry ’bout us,” the leader of the three knights sneered.

His reply rubbed me the wrong way. Under any other circumstance, it may have just been a casual exchange between close friends, but the knight radiated hostility toward Sir Fenix. They looked to be about the same age as him, so I assumed they were acting out of jealousy.

I definitely didn’t want to marry any of them. Even less so after they ignored my courteous bow. They had just walked past me without any kind of greeting. Maybe it was not my place to complain, but I was still a guest from the House of

Sukuna. If they couldn't show me any respect, that reflected poorly on the House of Sacula. Even the trainee waiting maid who told me where to find Sir Fenix had shown proper etiquette.

To make matters worse, they had ogled my face, breasts, and hips. *Don't think I didn't notice. I'll make sure to remember your names.* With furrowed brows, I approached Sir Fenix.

"Who were those people, Sir Fenix? They seemed overly...friendly with you." Surely, he would understand what I meant by that. He seemed quite apologetic upon noticing my frown.

"Those three are former classmates of mine who are trouble magnets. Their leader is called Moldo." What an interesting way of putting it. Their mere existence seemed to cause trouble. Having classmates like that must be tiring.

"Oh, they're former classmates. No wonder they seemed so casual." I was curious to know what trouble they had caused this time, but I suppressed the urge. I had other business.

However, the more he talked about them the more I suspected that these three might be related to my other business. "That said, I have not talked to them in recent years," Sir Fenix continued. "Last time I saw them must have been five years ago."

"Five years is a long time."

"They caused some trouble that got a bit out of hand. Luckily, it was resolved peacefully. And it seems they learned their lesson." He didn't mention whether they voluntarily showed restraint or if they had been forced to show restraint. I assumed the latter. Since they had mentioned patrolling rural areas, I imagined they had gotten on the wrong side of some powerful person who kept them in low positions.

And now they had come to talk with Sir Fenix for the first time in several years. That couldn't have been a coincidence given the recent scheming of Marquis Datara. I would love to know what Sir Fenix thought about this situation. I glanced at him and our eyes met. To my delight, it appeared that Sir Fenix didn't consider it a coincidence either. Now was the chance to sell my skills.

“Sir Fenix, I have heard some curious rumors that might interest you. It may not be my place to interfere, but would you hear me out?” My smile must have looked quite aggressive. My grandfather would have lectured me about better controlling my emotions. But I was talking to Sir Fenix and not my grandfather.

“Of course,” he replied with an even more aggressive smile. “Sacula and Sukuna have already formed an alliance. There is no issue with you giving your opinion on our affairs if you deem it necessary.” He talked so smoothly that it almost seemed like a trap. “Here, follow me.”

Sir Fenix led me to a small room inside the admin hall. It was full of unorganized piles of paper. It looked like a reference room.

“What rumors did you hear?” Sir Fenix said, interrupting my survey.

“Given my prior affiliation, it’s become a habit of mine to keep my ears open at all times.” As a Sukuna family member, information gathering was a basic skill. Now it was time to play with cards on the table. “So, I couldn’t help but overhear rumors that a few merchants and officials, who were at the cusp of financial and social bankruptcy, have started making some bold moves these past few months.”

“You have excellent ears,” Sir Fenix praised, implying that I hadn’t missed the mark. “What do you think they are planning?”

“In essence, they want to cause unrest in this region.”

“What makes you think that?”

“For them to make such bold moves, they would need financial backing. However, according to my research, neither the merchants nor the officials seem to enjoy much support within Sacula.” They had even managed to turn the slum’s mediator against them. They had reached rock bottom. And I had no doubt that Sir Fenix had led them there. *Very impressive.*

“So if they couldn’t find any support within the region, they must have a benefactor from outside. At the same time, there have been attacks from foreign insurgents dressed as refugees. Those are likely related.”

The House of Sacula couldn’t just ignore the insurrection in the Yanga region. They needed to prepare for a similar event at home. Sir Fenix likely thought the

same.

“In other words, the outside instigators are trying to incite an insurrection by fanning the flames of dissatisfaction in Sacula.”

“Yes, it would not be the first time.” *I knew it. It’s time for the next move then.*

“Bearing all that in mind, I think utmost caution should be advised for now.”
What do you say, Sir Fenix? Are you prepared to deal with all the upcoming scheming? If you have any doubts, I’d be more than prepared to put my Sukuna reconnaissance skills at your disposal. What are you willing to pay for my skills?

With an inviting smile, I slightly tilted my head. According to the House of Sukuna’s female spies, this gesture was an extremely cute knockout blow. I wondered how Sir Fenix would react.

“Splendid. You really do have excellent hearing, Seire.” His lavish praise made me feel victorious. This might go according to plan. Sir Fenix picked up a bundle of papers from the desk.

“This is a report from our intelligence department, which reached the same conclusion. Maybe you could conduct an even more detailed analysis if you read it?” An intelligence report... *Shouldn’t you keep that a secret?!*

I felt my face turning pale. Was this by any chance the intelligence department’s storage room? I knew that the House of Sacula wasn’t putting much effort into their reconnaissance activities, but this was ridiculous! If you handled secret information this carelessly in Sukuna, you would lose your head! I wanted to gain Sir Fenix’s trust, not ascend to heaven together!



As I was considering a way to prevent my imagined death, Sir Fenix forcibly handed me the documents. My heart skipped a beat when his hand touched mine a little.

“I can’t accept this! Do you have Lord Itsuki, or rather His Excellency Count Sacula’s permission to hand me these documents?”

“Lord Itsuki gave me permission to hand them out at my discretion if I find someone capable for the job.”

I had wrongly assumed that he was exceeding his authority. It seemed that Sir Fenix enjoyed the House of Sacula’s full trust. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have given him the freedom to choose personnel for the intelligence department. Their relationship must be blessed by the Monkey God. Still, wouldn’t he need extra permission for someone from a different region?

Suddenly I felt a heatwave of passion coming my way.

“To be honest, I have just about had it with those people,” Sir Fenix uttered with a fiery smile. “They have been meddling with me and my friends for the past ten years.”

He was furious. No matter how much he tried to hide it, his anger showed. This was the ferocity that the slum boss had mentioned.

“Ten years. Can you believe that? And they are still causing more trouble.” His passionate speech reduced my hesitation to ashes. It left no room for my objections.

I wondered what they had done ten years ago. Then it struck me. Her Highness Princess Alicia. If I remembered correctly, the princess had been the catalyst for the feud between Sacula and Datara ten years ago.

Rumor had it that Arthur still lived at the Sacula residence in the capital. And it appeared that they regularly exchanged correspondences. They must have been quite close. No wonder Sir Fenix was so angry.

“Our intelligence department is in need of a spymaster. Can we count on your impressive skills, Your Excellency Lady Sukuna?”

It appeared that while I had been trying to sell my skills, Sir Fenix had been

trying to buy them. For the sake of his good friend the princess, he was willing to involve an outsider in his fight against Marquis Dataara.

Since I had planned to offer my services anyway, I had no problem with the outcome. I probably should have been happy. I just had one little complaint: I was burning with jealousy.

Strategy Papers

One month later, our new spymaster informed me that the intelligence department had completed its analysis of the current political situation. After skimming through the report, I relayed it to the higher-ups and requested a strategy meeting, which was called into session at once with Acting Count Lord Itsuki serving as chairperson.

“I gathered you here today because our intelligence department led by Lady Seire, the granddaughter of His Excellency Viscount Sukuna, presented me with a report detailing the urgency of our current situation—why do I feel we’ve got a problem before we’ve even started...” Lord Itsuki stopped and looked me in the eyes, but I did not get what he meant.

“You are just imagining things. Can we start with the intelligence report?” I asked.

“Has he entered the zone, Maika?”

“Yeah, you won’t get through to him no matter what you say now.”

“No use trying then...”

Upon witnessing my superior’s unprofessional behavior, I could only sigh. This was not the time for small talk with his niece. He was usually pretty reliable, but for some reason, today he was messing around. Thus, I decided to continue the meeting myself.

“Could you please summarize the report, Seire?”

“Y-Yes! A-Are you s-sure it’s okay if I do it?” Lady Seire reflexively stood up with a hesitant glance toward Lord Itsuki, who had a distant look in his eyes.

“Uhm, yeah, sure. No problem. Ash gave you permission, and I trust his judgment.” Apparently, Sacula’s ruler had only just remembered that he had given me full discretion over the intelligence department’s personnel affairs. I had effectively been in charge since the Ajole village incident.

“It’s amazing how much you trust Sir Fenix. Normally, an unsanctioned, arbitrary decision like that would warrant severe disciplinary action,” Lady Seire murmured, unable to hide her astonishment at Lord Itsuki’s lax approval.

“Normally it would indeed, but it’s Ash,” Lord Itsuki replied.

“Yeah, Ash’s allowed to do that,” Maika added.

“It’s Ash after all,” Sir George chimed in.

“Just Ash being Ash” Even Mrs. Rihn had something to say.

Sacula’s administrators started noisily chatting among themselves.

“When it comes to acting on his own authority, he’s a habitual offender. No point in starting to punish him now,” Lord Itsuki said.

“And he did get approval. Albeit with some underhanded tricks...” Maika muttered.

“Ever since he’s arrived, Ash’s been getting things done before you even realize what’s going on. Each and every day!” Sir George declared.

“And since the outcome is always overwhelmingly positive, there is no real reason to stop him,” Mrs. Rihn concluded.

Shouldn’t we talk about the crisis at hand? I thought they were more mature, but alas, I was wrong...

“Everyone, the meeting has started, so we should leave the small talk for later and listen to Seire’s report,” I interjected, but for some reason, they responded by blaming me for derailing *their* conversation. *How absurd.* Since there was no time for any more absurdities, I decided to just move the meeting along.

“Spymaster, please make your case.”

“Amazing... I mean, u-understood. I will now present the report from the intelligence department.” Lady Seire cleared her throat before beginning to explain the disturbing movements in the region this past month. “It is safe to assume that the recent movements against Sacula stem from Viscount Yanga, with Marquis Datara pulling the strings from behind. Their most obvious ploy is the attempted destabilization of the region by sending refugees to us. However, that plan has been unsuccessful so far,” Lady Seire said, analyzing the situation.

Since Sacula's agricultural production had increased, we were able to welcome and feed the refugees. And once people had their stomachs filled, they had no reason to cause any chaos.

The tragedy of Ajole village only lay a few years back. Their village had slowly rotted away from neglect. Nonetheless, it had managed to survive, albeit in a slightly different form. After learning the newest farming methods and technology, the villagers had spread out to other villages across the region, where they were helping to stimulate local agricultural production.

The experience we had gained when accommodating the former Ajole residents had created a foundation that allowed us to welcome the new refugees as well. Following their own tragedy, the Ajole villagers had cultivated the strength to simply brush off any enemy's absurd schemes. *I love heartwarming stories like that! Makes me so warm inside that I could probably generate some steam power.*

Another obvious ploy of Yanga and Datara was having bandits and soldiers camouflaged as refugees. They were targeting highly important targets such as the carriage carrying the exchange students. According to the intelligence report, Manera and Doruo were leaking the necessary information to enemy spies. Scary to think that there were traitors among our own circles. However, this plan was not very successful either.

As a frontier region, we always sent guards alongside important travelers in the case of a demon encounter. And ever since the packed meals improved, morale had increased among the patrol squads. The bandits in disguise stood no chance against a team of motivated soldiers ready for a demon fight. The difference in combat ability was so great that the Sacula soldiers often managed to fend off enemies with a single strike.

All the points so far had been regarding the obvious movements we could see for ourselves. But now it was time to talk about the schemes that had yet to come to fruition.

"In addition to Manera and Doruo, we have also identified other subjects as having been in contact with enemy spies. These are the soldiers Moldo and Redeato, as well as the Gochie company. We have testimonies claiming that

they have been voicing strong dissatisfaction with Sacula's current administration," Lady Seire explained.

"In other words, a dissident faction has formed." Lord Itsuki had adopted a serious tone of voice.

"It might be more precise to say that someone put it together," Lady Seire replied.

"I see. Go on."

"Analyzing the contents of their complaints and the movements following their interactions with the enemy spies, we were able to identify their, or rather Marquis Datara's, further schemes."

Moldo's crew's motives were obvious. Their jealousy of a *certain someone* had led them to cause so much trouble that they had fallen into disgrace with the acting count, who had subsequently stationed them at a boring post.

While they had merely reaped what they had sown, the culprits seemed to think otherwise. According to them, the acting count had unfairly punished them because he was biased toward a *certain someone*. Accordingly, to retake their rightful position, they would have to erase that *certain someone*.

In short, they were targeting me.

"If you were to hear them tell it, the acting count has been led astray by Sir Fenix's flattery. They conspire to take the Sacula family into custody while they govern as substitutes. This would purportedly be until the Saculas come back to their senses. Although their true motives are unclear, their plans are undoubtedly influenced by Marquis Datara," Lady Seire concluded.

Manera and Doruo's objectives were also pretty clear. By their own standards, they had done no wrong. They probably thought that a little embezzlement was well within their rights. If their posts were in danger over such trivial matters, the government's collapse was imminent. And to add insult to injury, a stupid, arrogant farmer boy who did not understand politics—according to them—had instigated the inquiry.

In order to guide the government back to the right path, they had to punish that peasant. An unfounded grudge dressed up in the form of righteous

indignation.

In short, they were targeting me.

“Just like the others, they also hope to take the Sacula family into custody and govern as substitutes until the acting count and his family come back to their senses. But once again, it’s presumably at the behest of Marquis Datara. So it’s not like that’s their primary motive,” Lady Seire reached the same conclusion again.

Finally, the Gochie company was trying to avoid going bankrupt. In other words, they were aiming to improve their business. However, according to the intelligence department’s report, they had somehow concluded that to achieve their goal, they needed to eliminate the person who had driven them to the brink of bankruptcy in the first place.

It was terrifying how destitution could lead one to such simplistic thoughts. I could not help but feel sorry for my enemy. However, incomprehensibly, Lady Seire concluded that their objective was not entirely unreasonable considering how excessive their punishment had been.

Well, in short, they were targeting me.

“In addition, the others involved in the plot promised to appoint them purveyors after taking over from the Sacula family, but that proposal also seems to stem from Marquis Datara. So that doesn’t seem to be their primary motive...” Lady Seire repeated the same conclusion for the third time.

Thus the report had finished. Lady Seire, Lord Itsuki, Sir George, and Mrs. Rihn all stared at me.

“Somehow that report gives the impression that Ash is the embodiment—or rather, the source—of all evil...” Lord Itsuki remarked.

“And yet, despite all those grudges, I’m not even worried in the slightest for Ash,” Sir George asserted.

“Like a Prince of Darkness who can only be defeated by the hero with his sacred sword,” Mrs. Rihn commented.

Upon hearing the intelligence report, the three adults were acting like the

problem had been solved already without the need to discuss any countermeasures. My dear Maika, however, was different. It just went to show how lovely she really was.

In fact, it appeared that my fiancée had taken the information quite seriously. She was sitting with her face down, contemplating a plan. Absorbed in her thoughts, she muttered to herself. “Now they’re not just trying to obstruct our marriage, but planning to kill my Ash? What the hell? Is this a bad joke? How many more sins do they plan to commit? Could it be that they are just plain stupid? Maybe I should pity them. But I can’t find any compassion for them. What should I do? I can’t allow them to breathe the same air as Ash. I’m angry that they’re alive and well right now. But it’s going to be a headache to deal with their corpses too. Just thinking about them gives me a headache already. Ah—”

Maika’s hand unconsciously wandered to her hip, where she usually kept her favorite sword. Noticing her bloodlust, the adults finally stopped making light of the situation.

“All right, let’s discuss how to thwart Marquis Datara’s plans,” Lord Itsuki said in an attempt to bring order back to the meeting.

“With all our strength,” Maika stood up to declare.

“What do you mean?” her uncle asked hesitatingly.

“We’ll crush the enemy with all our strength,” his niece replied in a steely, cold voice. Her tone implied that no further discussion was needed.

“Yes, of course.” Lord Itsuki did not even attempt to object. Probably a wise decision. Maika was shrouded in a menacing aura, much like a demon sword that killed anyone who touched it. The wise Lord Itsuki frantically looked to me, as if to say, *My niece is scary. Please do something. She is your fiancée.*

I guess I should say something. I smiled at my beloved bloodthirsty Maika, delighted to see her fury on my behalf. “You look cute when you’re angry too, but I prefer your usual bright smile.”

“S-Stop it, Ash! W-We’re in the middle of a meeting! Everyone’s watching! B-But I guess I can smile if you want me to...”

And there it was: one super adorable, lovey-dovey Maika smile ready to go. I was truly blessed to be loved by someone like her.

Our countermeasures were ready one week later.

Hermes's Perspective

Another day, another lively explosion at our lab's prestigious testing site. Today, it was not the motive power department conducting experiments, but instead, the young knights were testing new weapons. Among them were Glen and a few other familiar faces, so I decided to make an appearance.

"How's the new arsenal?" I asked the small group of knights whom I recognized as being from the same study group at the academy.

"No problems. Much easier to use than the previous model," Glen replied on behalf of all of them. He was holding up the weapon known as a "rifle." Ever since we had obtained sulfur, Ash had instructed the development of weapons that shot bullets by exploding gunpowder. An evolved bow and arrow, if you will.

"Would it be useful in actual combat?"

"We've tested them extensively, and there haven't been any problems so far. I don't think we have to worry about them breaking during a fight." I took the rifle from Glen. After removing the bullets, I checked its functionality. *Yep, seems fine.* "However," Glen continued. "Whether we'll be able to master the weapon during actual combat is a different question."

"Yeah, you can't cover everything in training. In a real fight, you have to shoot at living targets."

"These new weapons are easy to use, but you can't really hold back. And I'm not sure how they will fare in melee combat."

"Yeah, in the heat of the moment, the bullets could bounce off in all directions and hit friends and foe alike," I noted.

"The untrained soldiers will only use rifles to shoot at the enemy from behind bulwarks. And we don't intend on using them in close combat, so it should be

fine.”

It should be fine, but actual combat was unpredictable. I knew the difference between theory and practice all too well. I hadn’t expected my radial engine to explode either. No matter how carefully you plan and prepare, you can’t be sure unless you actually try.

I returned the rifle to Glen. Then I proceeded to also check Horus’s rifle, another of my former study mates. “What do you think about the rifle?”

“It’s great! Let me know as soon as I can get my hands on one of these.” *I’m glad to hear you like it.* Horus was a bit of a problem child, who was so infatuated with the new weapon that he tended to use up all our ammunition. Consequently, he was probably the most skilled rifle user.

“I mean how does it compare to the previous models?” I wanted to hear his impressions and predictions regarding actual combat based on all his testing.

“It’s become easier to engage in rapid-fire, and the bullets get jammed a lot less. Oh, and it’s much lighter. You could probably carry it for quite some time before tiring out. Maybe you could try to improve its maneuverability, but if you shorten its barrel, that will also decrease its range...”

That was exactly what I had wanted to hear! Great analysis from the man who always kept shooting until he used up all our bullets—and got scolded for wasting resources. He had surprisingly few comments considering how much time he spent firing the rifles.

“Yeah, unfortunately, short-barreled types only work for short distances. I can try adjusting it a little to suit your needs.”

“I’m not sure what I prefer. It’s fun shooting from afar, but I also like to shoot multiple targets while moving around.” *I was asking what’s beneficial in combat, not asking what you prefer personally. How did someone as free-spirited as you become a knight?* I sighed and returned the rifle to Horus. The next person in line was not a knight, but Saias in his riding attire.

“I was a bit confused about how to use it at first, but once you get used to it, shooting’s super easy.” *Right? Exactly what I’m saying!* I grinned upon hearing Saias’s praise.

Guns were deadly weapons, stronger and easier to use than a bow. You could attack your enemy by simply inserting a bullet and pulling the trigger. The only disadvantage was that it required both more time and resources to produce than a bow and arrow. In fact, those new weapons had used up a considerable amount of our lab's budget, which made me feel a bit conflicted as someone who needed funding for developing my plane...

Nonetheless, I agree that it was the right choice to produce the weapons now. It appeared that Yanga and Datara were currently trying to meddle with Sacula's affairs. That was also the reason why Saias participated in the training despite not being a knight. In order to reduce the damages from imminent bandit attacks on villages across the region, the administration had decided to reinforce its defenses by deploying rifle-wielding soldiers.

While some villages were defended by knights like Glen and Horus, there weren't enough personnel to cover the entire region. Luckily, there were enough willing locals like Saias who decided to undergo weapon training themselves.

"Train well before you head back. Then you can blow away any bandit with a flick of the finger."

"You sure?"

"Of course! I stopped developing my plane for this! If you use that gun and your village still suffers damages, I'll punch you!" I glared at him. The same applied to Glen, Horus, and everyone else.

Glen and Horus, who knew the circumstances, smiled wryly, but Saias seemed a bit perplexed. "You're awfully motivated. You seem very proud of this weapon."

"Why wouldn't I be?!" I sneered. "Ash wanted a weapon that would prevent any casualties, even when faced with a hundred demons, so I put all my effort and funding into this project."

Saias broke into laughter. But he wasn't the only one. Everybody who knew Ash had a smile on their face. From the outside, it may have looked like they were making fun of his grand ambitions, but they would have been wrong. Ash may talk big, but he never lied. So, if Ash really thought those rifles could deal

with a hundred demons, it was no doubt a powerful weapon. More than enough reason to be motivated.

As a Sacula citizen, demon flocks were a constant source of fear. As a graduate of the strongest class in the history of the military academy, they were my sworn enemies, who had nearly killed my precious, irreplaceable friend Ash. With this weapon, Ash won't nearly die again if he faces off against another werewolf. Thus I had become quite motivated. Maybe a bit too much.

"Reina's been scolding me for using too much money." I scowled. For some reason, the others burst out laughing again. *Just so you know, Reina's lectures have become worse since the academy. But I guess that's no longer any of your concern...*

Although in the end, she had helped me out by increasing the budget. In short, those new weapons were the sum of my feelings, my sacrifices, and my research!

"Don't disgrace me by letting a few measly bandits wreak havoc!" Those rifles were meant to defeat one hundred demons without our side suffering any losses. And I would prove they lived up to that ideal.

Seire's Perspective

I had concluded that Yanga and Datara's troops were finally starting to move. Yes, *I, Seire Sukuna*, had reached the conclusion.

"Is it really okay for me to make that judgment?" I spontaneously asked Sir Fenix on our way back from an important meeting.

"Oh, do you have some doubts regarding the intel?" I shook my head at his slightly provocative question.

"Of course I'm confident in my judgment. It's harvest season, there have been sightings of bandits from villages all over the region, and there have been reports of Datara spies roaming the slums. Our enemies have undoubtedly set their plan into motion."

"I concur. You have impeccable judgment. Well done on analyzing and summarizing all that information."

I had been honing my skills all my life and now I used them to curry favor with the House of Sacula—or Sir Fenix himself, I should say. I was confident in my judgment. Yet, I couldn't bury my feeling of surprise.

"Still, to leave such an important decision to an outsider like me... The House of Sacula is very trusting." I was amazed that he didn't consider the possibility of me being a traitor. Lord Itsuki and Mrs. Rihn occasionally paused to consider the nature of our arrangement, so there must have been at least some level of concern. But Sir Fenix never showed any signs of worry. And neither did Lady Maika.

"The House of Sukuna would not benefit at all if you betrayed us. I have made sure of that." Sir Fenix smiled with resolute confidence. My heart throbbed at seeing the slightly mischievous look upon his face. By dangling the soap and liquor as bait, he had effortlessly reeled in the House of Sukuna to form an alliance. "I firmly believe that Sukuna is our ally. Although I guess it is still possible for you personally to be bought off for a large amount of money..." Sir Fenix's sly smile suggested that was even less likely. "But you are very intelligent. Even if you were to betray us, you would not do it at this point in time. It would be pointless right now. You would wait until it would yield a better result."

Sir Fenix's explanation was on point. I involuntarily nodded along. "You're right. N-Not that I'm planning to betray you! Really, I'm not. But if I was your enemy, this wouldn't be a great time for me to go turncoat."

If I betrayed him now, I would gain very little. The Sacula administration had already taken appropriate measures to counter Yanga and Datara's plan. Any cheap tricks at this point would have a very limited effect.

"I know. I trust both you and His Excellency Viscount Sukuna. You would never do anything that hurts your profits. It'd be illogical. The most troublesome friends and foes are those who act against their own self-interest."

Sir Fenix was a prime example of a person who came up with crazy ideas. On closer inspection, however, those ideas were always logical and profitable. Nonetheless, there was usually a phase where normal people would perceive Sir Fenix's actions as unreasonable, because he surpassed their understanding.

Such as employing an outsider as the region's spymaster.

"All right, Seire. It looks like the intelligence department will be very busy. I am sure there will be a lot of reports from the towns and villages, and the other departments as well. I am counting on you!" Sir Fenix smiled at me, pretending to ignore my mixed feelings.

"I will deal with it the Sukuna way." It seemed that Sir Fenix was relying on both my and the House of Sukuna's skills. I couldn't afford to disappoint him.

New information arrived at my desk in rapid succession. Seeing the papers pile up on my desk, I couldn't help but sit in awe at the speed with which it was delivered. No wonder the maids and knights of Sacula had a reputation for moving swiftly.

Freshness was the essence of intelligence. No matter how important the information, if it arrived too late, it wasn't worth much more than a piece of rotten fish. In some cases, every day counted. In that regard, Sacula had extremely competent informants.

First, I had received word of signs of an imminent attack from Yanga and Datara bandits. The intelligence department had relayed information to the administration that told of the enemy forces beginning their operation. As soon as they received the news, they sent troops out across the region, led by Sacula knights. Hopefully, they could prevent any damage.

Next, the slum outlaws displayed their quick wits. I would have loved to ask Rohko how he had acted so promptly. Rather than fighting for the enemy, they had arrested the spies for us. Since even officials and knights had been bought off, it would have only been safe to assume that slum dwellers, who had even more reason to act against the administration, were in the enemy's pocket too. But they were not. Sacula was truly a strange place.

Apparently, the outlaws had delivered the tied-up spies to the guardroom and left, again sending their regards to the "young master." *I guess that's Sir Fenix's influence. I'm beginning to understand everyone's attitude toward him...*

After being chased out of the slums, some of the spies had run to Manera and Doruo's residences. That was our chance to strike. I hurriedly prepared a report

for the emergency council and suggested arranging the legal arrests of those spies and the two main culprits sheltering them.

“The arrest squad is ready to move out!” Lady Maika, who had sat silently through the entire meeting, declared in a voice as cold as steel. Her tone was businesslike yet sharp as a blade. It sent shivers down my spine. Up until now, I had avoided looking in her direction. She was shrouded in a terrifying aura. One wrong word or look, and she might explode. The other members, including Lord Itsuki, had avoided her too. The only exception was the man sitting next to her, Sir Fenix.

However, now Lady Maika had spoken up herself. It wasn’t long ago that she’d been volunteering to personally arrest Manera and Doruo herself, as well as Moldo and his gang while she was at it. Thus it was not an unusual statement. However, she looked terrifying when she stood up from her seat. Like a monster I had imagined as a child. A human shell with inhuman ambitions.

The sound of a gulp echoed through the room. I wasn’t sure whether it came from me or Lord Itsuki.

“G-Good luck, Maika! And arrest them, okay? Don’t kill them. Please bring them back alive, if possible. You can do that right?” Lord Itsuki repeatedly confirmed this with her. I shared his worries. It may have been an arrest squad, but she was brimming with bloodlust.

“I know. It is an arrest squad. I will refrain from cutting their heads off.” Her polite reply and forced smile made her look even more terrifying. If only she was her usual cheerful self—although it would probably still be eerie on top of her bloodlust.

“G-Good. Sorry for asking.” Lord Itsuki couldn’t bring himself to caution her any further and retreated with an apology. From an intelligence point of view, I would also prefer to capture our enemies alive, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

Lady Maika headed for the door. A fine choice. I was half expecting her to punch a hole in the wall and climb through it. Suddenly, she stopped. Or rather, was stopped. Sir Fenix grabbed Lady Maika’s sword-wielding hand. *Are you sure*

you want to touch her right now? My eyes opened wide in disbelief.

“Good luck with the arrest, Maika.” Everything was fine. Sir Fenix didn’t seem perturbed at all by Lady Maika’s behavior. He just treated her as his fiancée, just like any other day.

In response, Lady Maika’s expression became a bit softer. Her blank stare gave way to a faint genuine smile.

“Thanks, Ash.”

“And take care. If you were to become injured, I am not sure I would be able to hold myself back.”

Lady Maika’s face turned red upon hearing Ash’s endearing concerns. I felt a little second-hand embarrassment too.

“Don’t say stuff like that! I might get too motivated and accidentally chop off some heads.”

“I would rather you chop off some heads than get injured yourself.”

“R-Really? Okay then... I’m heading out.”

“Good luck!”

Lady Maika’s rage had calmed down. Instead, she was now extremely peppy. Which was still preferable to her earlier bloodlust. We had witnessed an exchange worthy of the couple hailed as being the envy of all the kingdom’s lovers. Lady Maika should be able to hold herself back now.

Once a sigh of relief had wafted through the room, Sir Fenix calmly pressed on with the meeting. “That should take care of Manera and Doruo. We just have to wait for Maika’s report. Since we have dealt with the majority of the spies now, we should probably move on to the Gochie company. Any objections?”

Since that was part of the plan, nobody objected. Or rather, after dampening Lady Maika’s bloodthirsty aura, nobody had the strength left to even reply. But the acting count eventually gritted his teeth and shook off his exhaustion.

“I will leave that to you, Ash, as previously discussed. But make sure to report to me before you go and after you’re done.”

“Of course. You are the commanding officer, so I will naturally report the start and end of my mission.” Lord Itsuki’s request may have sounded obvious to most, but Sir Fenix was the kind of person who, when handed control of personnel, employed an outsider as his spymaster. *Good luck bridling him, Lord Itsuki.*

Less than an hour later, Maika returned to the meeting room with a warm smile.

“I’m reporting back from my mission.” With visible relief on her face, she sat down next to Sir Fenix. I would have loved to hear a detailed account of what had happened during the last hour, but all we got was one sentence: “Moldo’s up next.”

“It appears Manera and Doruo’s arrest went smoothly,” Sir Fenix said, supplementing her brief report.

Great! Glad everything’s going according to plan. Somehow my thought process had reverted to that of a child. The information overload was straining my brain. There was too much unexpected intel, especially coming from our side. I needed something sweet. Maybe it wasn’t my place as both an outsider and newcomer, but I felt like asking the servants for a honey-infused tea. With some cake, if possible. But before I could try putting in an order, Sir Fenix announced his next move.

“Now then, since most of the spies have been caught, I will pay a visit to the Gochie company with an investigation squad.”

With Manera and Doruo dealt with and the slum—the spies’ stronghold—cleared out, information transmission to the enemy should be severely hampered. According to our plan, it was thus time to properly kick-start our operation in the city. *But...can’t we have a little break first?*

Sir Fenix was out of the room in seconds.

“Maika, you must be thirsty. How about we have some tea and a light snack? Anyone else?” Lord Itsuki’s offer may have been mainly intended for Lady Maika, but I gladly accepted it.

As I was enjoying a delicious pancake made with dried fruits, a maid came

into the meeting room.

“U-Um, the inspection of the Gochie company has been completed. I have come to deliver the report.” Lady Renge bowed upon noticing everyone’s gazes. She may have looked a bit timid, but Sir Fenix had appointed her as a top inspector of his squad. His endorsement had claimed that she could analyze data and numbers as fast as lightning. Considering that I hadn’t even finished my light snack in the time that it took for the inquiry to finish, he hadn’t exaggerated.

“Well done,” Lord Itsuki praised before encouraging her to continue her report.

“We managed to confirm that the Gochie company omitted some transactions from the register that they submitted. They bought swords, spears, helmets, breastplates, and greaves from a company in the Datara region,” she reported. “According to Ash, it was enough infantry equipment for approximately two hundred men.”

“That matches up with Spymaster Seire’s previous analysis.” Lord Itsuki steered the conversation toward me. I gulped down my pancake. *Sorry that I’m taking my time finishing my meal, but these pancakes are just too good to eat quickly.*

“Yes, it is the same tactic that Marquis Datara used to spark a revolt in the Yanga region,” I noted.

After inciting the House of Yanga’s second eldest son, Marquis Datara had provided him with enough military equipment to stage a revolt. And much like this new attempt, he had also made sure that the regional military was spread thin.

“He thinks he can use the same trick twice? How much does he underestimate us?”

“It is not surprising for a central noble to look down upon the rural regions...”

“You’re right. And you managed to predict it too.”

When I had first suggested that the House of Datara might use the same tactic again, Sir George had raised some doubts and suggested that we not

underestimate Marquis Datara. But while the Sacula knight's readiness was commendable, Marquis Datara's maneuvers were always going to be limited.

The Datara region was far away. Any orders given by the marquis to his troops suffered from a time delay. And while this problem could have been solved by stationing a commander in Sacula, there weren't many people capable of running an undercover operation like that in enemy territory. Especially since the marquis didn't want to risk losing such valuable personnel. Not too long ago, he had lost a group of assassins in Sacula when they had gone after the princess.

With that in mind, it was highly likely that Marquis Datara would use a plan that had been successful in the past. He was convinced that causing chaos during Sacula's harvest season would yield the results he was looking for.

"If we manage to seize the equipment at the Gochie company, we should be able to keep the unrest to a minimum." I glanced at Lady Renge, who nodded briskly. Her movements resembled that of an adorable little critter—one of the endearing gestures taught to the women of the House of Sacula. And her execution was close to flawless.

"Y-Yes. Ash is already on his way to confiscate the equipment. It appears to have been stored in the Gochie warehouse."

"He's quick, as usual." Lord Itsuki folded his arms and smiled contently.

If I may, Lord Itsuki. What happened to reporting back to you? Things may be going according to plan, but Sir Fenix went to the warehouse without letting us know. Mrs. Rihn seemed to agree with me; she glared at Lord Itsuki disapprovingly.

"You all heard him say he would report the start and end of the mission. He considers the confiscation to be part of one big mission to deal with the Gochie company. We should consider ourselves lucky he sent Renge to give a status report." Nobody had any objections. Lord Itsuki was indeed used to dealing with Sir Fenix.

Moldo had returned from his bandit subjugation mission in the countryside. He puffed up with pride upon presenting the few dozen bandits who had

surrendered to him. Of course, there was no way Moldo, one of the main suspects, had fought and captured the bandits properly. His captives were all undercover Yanga troops, and they planned on recovering the equipment from the Gochie warehouse to raise an army.

Upon hearing of these findings, a terrifying aura radiated from Lady Maika across the meeting room. Maybe I could clear the air a little by opening the windows? I had to do something now that Sir Fenix wasn't here to soothe her.

"What if Lady Maika took some soldiers and stood by at the exchange student residence?"

"That sounds like a great idea, Lady Seire! Let's hear what she thinks!" Lord Itsuki exclaimed in a loud voice. One glance was enough to understand that he shared my desperation.

My plan was simple. We had arrested most of Marquis Datara's spies during Moldo's absence. In other words, his ignorance allowed us to provide him with disinformation via our fake Datara spies.

"Originally, we planned to arrest Moldo's crew alongside the other Yanga soldiers in the Gochie warehouses, but given our current advantage, we could work out a plan to separate them from the rest."

"Makes sense! Since we know their objective, we can easily lure them out!"



“And it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume they believe their target is at the exchange student residence.” I didn’t dare call their target by name. After all, that was the reason for Lady Maika’s wrath. And I had no intention of playing with fire near an oil-soaked bundle of straw.

“How about we disseminate information that the Sacula family will dine with the exchange students tonight?” I suggested. It would seem natural to organize a gathering to update the students on the current situation. “We’ll make sure to have Moldo and his crew follow that lead while the Yanga troops are busy collecting the equipment from the warehouses.” *I swear by my Sukuna reconnaissance training to make this mission a success and return peace to the meeting room!* I locked eyes with Lord Itsuki, and we both nodded at each other.

“What do you say, Maika? If this plan works, Moldo and his gang will be all yours!”

If we stuck with our plan to capture them in the different warehouses, Lady Maika would only be able to take care of one of them. But this way, she could enjoy herself to her heart’s content.

“Of course. I gladly accept your orders. It should also make it easier to capture the soldiers without their commanding officers present.” Lady Maika calmly analyzed the situation with a smile that would most likely haunt me in my dreams.

Thus the meeting room’s peace was secured again. Of course, Moldo and his crew would face hell, but I didn’t mind sacrificing them. *Enjoy your suffering!*

Sir Fenix had come back to the meeting room.

“I have returned from my mission. We successfully subjugated the Yanga troops and seized control of the Gochie warehouses. The warehouses have been turned into a makeshift prison and we have positioned guards outside. We suffered no fatalities, but there were some injuries. We are still assessing the situation on the enemy’s side.” Sir Fenix surveyed the room upon finishing his report. “Has Maika not returned yet?” He must be worried about his fiancée. “Hopefully, she is not overdoing things...” Oh, he was just concerned

about his fiancée's bloodlust. Maybe she hadn't caught Moldo and his crew alive. But there was indeed no need to worry about Lady Maika.

Nonetheless, it was impressive that the Itsutsu crisis had been solved within a single day. Even if Moldo had somehow escaped Lady Maika, that wouldn't have changed the situation. There were no troops left for them to lead. The worst-case scenario of an overthrown government had been averted.

However, we were still faced with the tedious task of dealing with the chaos outside the city walls. For now, we would have to wait to hear about the casualties of our soldiers and the villages that they had been assigned to protect. Depending on the situation, Viscount Sukuna and Baron Nepton might have to provide support. If Sacula's defenses became unstable now, they would not be able to confidently face Marquis Datara, or even worse, a demon invasion from the Roaring Dragon Mountains.

It was unfortunate timing. We were on the heels of an economic upturn caused by Sir Fenix's very kind disclosure of the soap and liquor recipes. We couldn't let his efforts be in vain. After letting out a sigh, I raised my head and saw that I was the only person with a gloomy look on their face.

"This went smoother than expected! Virtually no casualties on our side," Lord Itsuki said.

"All thanks to the intelligence department. This was the first time that we were able to predict our enemy's movements so accurately. Please make sure to express your gratitude to Viscount Sukuna and inform them of Lady Seire's excellent work as our spymaster," Sir Fenix urged the acting count.

"We truly couldn't have done it without you, Lady Seire. Our people aren't well versed in that sort of precise work."

The House of Sacula had a reputation for not being very detail oriented. The central nobles said so with disdain, the regional nobles with affection. My grandfather had also told me that since I was a child. However, after coming here, I had discovered that reputation wasn't entirely true. One just had to look at the achievements of the laboratory. Without attention to detail, they wouldn't be able to produce such meticulous goods.

The head of the laboratory, Chief Reina, was also very careful and attentive.

As was her mother, Mrs. Rihn. Lady Renge's budget was always accurate, and Lady Suiren's reports were extremely detailed.

In other words, they had the required skill, but they didn't have the leeway to apply them to interpersonal relations due to the nature of Sacula's location. They focused on countermeasures against demons, and accordingly lacked the social skills necessary for a superior intelligence department. Thus, they mostly relied on their fighting strength.

But as proven by recent events, with a little help from someone who had honed their reconnaissance skills in Sukuna, they could go far. I glanced at Sir Fenix, who had personally acquired my services. Our eyes met, and he smiled at me. He probably thought he had struck a bargain. I couldn't help but smile as well. I felt my motivation increase even more.

"As the head of the intelligence division, I also feel relieved that we managed to bring the chaos in Itsutsu city under control with no casualties. However, we need to anticipate any damages suffered across the region, which could worsen the situation again. Basically, we should keep our heads cool." I urged caution in my capacity as the spymaster.

"You're absolutely right. Ash, now that the situation in the city has calmed down, please make sure that the reserve troops are ready to be deployed anytime." Lord Itsuki reacted in a fashion befitting the Sacula style. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"That would fall under Sir George's jurisdiction," Sir Fenix replied, trying to delegate the work to his foster father.

"Can't you help him out a little? He's so busy that he couldn't even attend this meeting," Lord Itsuki said with a wry smile.

Currently, nearly all of Sacula's standing troops were deployed, and Itsutsu's reserves had been mobilized too. Moreover, the standing troops had been dispatched in small divisions all over the region. Therefore, the commanding officer had his hands full managing and coordinating all those scattered units. I hadn't seen Sir George's face in several days.

"I am quite busy myself, but if you insist. I will brief the soldiers who helped me seize the Gochie warehouses and have them prepare for an eventual

deployment.”

“Filial piety is important!”

“That has a different ring coming from someone whose father yearns to see his granddaughter’s face.”

The House of Sacula vassals chuckled at Sir Fenix and Lord Itsuki’s exchange as if there was no need to worry about any potential damage to the rest of the region.

Meanwhile, Lady Maika had returned. The look of relief on her face betrayed the results of her mission. Nonetheless, she gave a proper report.

“Here to report back from my mission. It was a perfect success.” No casualties on either side. Moldo and his crew had been captured alive. Although they probably felt they’d be better off dead at this point.

After everyone had finished reporting in, we were ready to wrap up the meeting with a summary when suddenly a new face entered the room.

“Sorry t-to interrupt. I’ve got... I have come to report news from the laboratory.” Going by his awkward behavior, he wasn’t used to attending meetings like this.

“Vice-Chief Hermes, to what do we owe this rare pleasure? Did something happen to Chief Reina?” Sir Fenix knitted his brows.

“She’s okay,” Vice-Chief Hermes replied. “She’s not injured, but she seemed like she was mentally exhausted, so she’s resting right now. Can I speak to Maika—I mean Ms. Maika?” It seemed he didn’t usually address her by title, so he wasn’t sure how to refer to her at such a formal occasion. Mrs. Rihn, who had probably been in charge of his education in the past, shook her head, but Lady Maika didn’t seem to mind and urged him to continue.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but could you come look after Reina when you get the time? There was an attack at the lab...which I’ve come to report...and you know how she doesn’t like fighting. Maybe she’s just startled, but she seems a bit off...”

“Got it. Should I go now?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Leave it to me. As the head of the Territory Reform Promotion Office, it’s my duty to look after my subordinates if they are unwell. So if you would please pardon me, I have business to attend to,” Lady Maika excused herself by creating an official pretext to rush to her friend’s aid.

Mrs. Rihn looked up at the ceiling as if to reflect on the girl’s education, and Lord Itsuki, the chairman of the meeting, sent Lady Maika off with a thumbs up.

“Well, Vice-Chief Hermes. Could you please give us a report on the attack on the laboratory,” Sir Fenix said, pressing on with the meeting. I was starting to grow fond of these Sacula meetings that were somehow both all over the place and perfectly balanced at the same time.

Vice-Chief Hermes sounded much calmer after Lady Maika had left the room. He could rest easy that Chief Reina would be taken care of.

“Okay, let’s go. I’m not used to giving reports, so I’ll just start from the beginning. Please forgive me if I go into too much detail.”

Hermes’s Perspective

Following the news that Sacula’s troops had been deployed to deal with the simultaneous bandit attack all over the region, the laboratory held a meeting in the garden to share information.

“Just like Itsutsu city, the laboratory will be on high alert for the time being. I urge everyone to act according to the emergency plan we laid out before. Any questions?”

While not all of the staff members had been aware of the looming unrest, they had all been notified of the emergency plan. Since the chief had asked them to simply adhere to it, there shouldn’t have been any questions.

“Chief Reina, I have a suggestion.” Someone raised their hand. Or rather, they were already speaking. The atmosphere at the lab may have been very casual, but during official meetings like this, the rules did require the chief’s permission before speaking.

I looked around the room to find the rule breaker. It was the newcomer, Torey. As he had only just started working here, it may have been mere ignorance, but I didn't like his confident smile.

"There are quite a lot of people here. If we grabbed the lab's tools, we could go help defend the city. We could improve the lab's reputation by protecting Itsutsu's citizens."

What kind of suggestion was that? Maybe it sounded good on the surface, but it was utter nonsense. Apparently, I wasn't the only one taken aback by it. Reina surprisingly took a moment before replying.

"There is no need for that. Lord Itsuki is in charge of the city's defense. As long as he doesn't request our help, that means they can handle the situation on their own. If we interfere without any orders, that will only lead to unnecessary confusion."

"You are of course right, Chief Reina, but you won't achieve any great deed by simply waiting for orders." Torey shrugged his shoulders. He behaved like someone teaching a little child. Torey was in fact older than her, but he was still just an underling at the lab. Yet he had the nerve to show the head of the lab so little respect.

"It seems that you underestimate the importance of protecting the laboratory. We are outside the city walls. That makes us much more vulnerable. Besides, it is our duty as researchers to safeguard all the cutting-edge technology stored here."

"Of course, you're right, Chief Reina. This lab holds a myriad of new technology. But that cannot replace our citizens' lives or assets."

"As I said before, Lord Itsuki is in charge of protecting them. If you are so eager to help, you should enlist with the military." Reina sharply glared at him. "As long as you are affiliated with this lab, you will follow my orders and protect our research. If you don't like that, you can leave now."

"You're going to make your staff cower if you talk like that, Chief Reina. Your tone should match your pretty face." Torey seemed to think that she didn't understand what he was saying. I felt livid. He was the one who didn't understand that he had just been given a warning to know his place. We should

probably tell the others to be on alert, as there was no telling what he would do. I glanced at Reina, who—despite her policy to remain stone-faced in front of her staff—let out a small sigh.

After the meeting had ended, I went to Reina's office to talk about Torey. As soon as she saw me, she held her head in her hands. "Sorry about earlier, Hermes."

"You've got nothing to apologize for. Besides, it was an internal meeting." If Torey had misbehaved outside, Reina may have had to apologize for her subordinate's behavior, but this only concerned the lab.

"You're right, but I'm probably the reason why he came to the lab in the first place."

"What do you mean? He's not a relative of yours, is he?" I didn't recall seeing his face at her New Year's family gathering.

"We're not related by blood. It's a bit complicated... In short, that guy asked for my hand in marriage."

"Huh? Are you kidding?" How could he behave like that after proposing to her? It seemed like he was out for a fight. Torey had treated Reina, the head of the lab, as his equal or even like he would a subordinate. If she tolerated such an attitude, there was a risk that others would start to look down on her.

"I don't know what to do. I turned down his marriage offer, but he's already treating me like his fiancée."

"If he was treating you like his fiancée, he would be showing you more respect as the head of lab. To me, it just looked like he was making fun of you." I would never display such an attitude when talking to her in her capacity as the head of lab, and we were close friends. At the military academy, they had taught us to always honor a superior's authority.

Reina flashed an appreciative smile. "Yeah, it's giving me a headache. I managed to consolidate my leadership over the past few years, and now it might waver because of this guy. And it took me a while to get the older staff members to recognize me as their boss..."

Luckily, not all of our staff were so easily influenced, but it was still an

unnecessary bother. I would get some of the senior members to tighten the reins later on. Someone like Belgo, who knew how scary Reina could be.

“That guy’s from an upper class family, so Lord Itsuki couldn’t outright refuse his application to join the lab. He wanted to start in a managerial position, but fortunately, Lord Itsuki made him an underling instead. That was all the acting count could do, however.”

“He doesn’t behave like an underling at all. That guy thinks he’s a big shot.”

“His family has served the count for several generations, just like mine, so that way of thinking must be ingrained into him...”

Most of the lab staff were commoners—descendants of artisan families like me or former prisoners like Belgo. For that guy to behave so uppity, he must have thought that social status was the most important quality here at the lab.

“That bastard won’t last long here.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. He should have realized that himself, looking at our superiors from the Territory Reform Promotion Office.” The Sacula region had strong meritocratic tendencies, and this place could be considered a vanguard in that regard.

“The Promotion Office section chief’s right-hand man and head of planning comes from a farmer family after all.”

Reina nodded in agreement and finally smiled again. “And the lab’s vice-chief from an artisan family,” she added.

“I’m happy to hear you compare me to Ash, but I’m no match for him.” I shrugged, but Reina shook her head.

“You are. At least to me.” *What does that mean?* As I frowned, Reina began chuckling. *Tsk, I can’t get mad at a face like that.*

Apparently, there had been some movement in the city. Belgo’s old friends and the section chief had plucked a bunch of spies from their hiding spots. While the laboratory was still calm, I was currently standing by in the head office. Since Reina had gone on an errand, I was left in command, and I’d

ordered the staff to carry on work as usual.

“I think it would be beneficial to the laboratory to move out and prove our valor—” Our know-it-all rookie had started babbling with a friendly smile on his face, but it was part of my job to tell him to shut up and return to his post.

How would that be “beneficial”? We didn’t need to steal our soldiers’ glory to stand high in the Acting Count Lord Itsuki and His Excellency Count Sacula’s favor. That’d just be petty. Our daily research already did that job. All our achievements would be overturned if the spies managed to sneak into the lab and destroy our machinery and plane models. I didn’t even want to consider the possibility of them getting their hands on the gunpowder and electrical components.

That guy probably didn’t understand any of that. After all, he hadn’t put his blood, sweat, and tears into creating those things. He probably even thought that something manufactured by artisans and former prisoners didn’t have much worth in the first place.

Torey left the office while grumbling something about being misunderstood. At the same time, Belgo, who was waiting with me, displayed a mix of anger and disgust on his face.

“He wants to prove his valor, but does that greenhorn even know where the enemy’s hiding and who we’re dealing with?” he muttered.

Great question. He most likely knew less than we did. Belgo obtained information from slum messengers, I heard rumors from my former classmates in the military, and Reina received reports from the intelligence department.

It seemed that Moldo had already come back from his expedition with a bunch of captives. According to the intelligence department, they were Yanga soldiers, and they had planned to grab equipment from the Gochie warehouses in order to stage a revolt. However, since even I already knew about their plan, the only equipment they were likely to find would be the ropes tied around their wrists. And since Ash had requested the flash grenades—extremely loud and bright gunpowder weapons—from the lab, our enemies didn’t stand a chance.

Since Torey came from a smaller city, he would have had difficulty accessing

this information. He might have heard rumors from his relatives working in the administrative halls, but that didn't warrant his attitude. I would have loved to cross-examine him on what he knew.

"Or maybe he knows where they're hiding because they work together?" Belgo muttered.

However, that was unlikely. Our intelligence department had already uncovered the traitors behind the unrest, and Torey was in no way related to them.

"What a shame. We could have easily kicked him out of the lab," Belgo replied upon hearing my explanation. The former prisoner may have spoken harshly, but Torey would have difficulty making any friends with his current attitude. Our department was supposed to research and develop weapons, not use them to fight the enemy. Torey had gotten it all wrong.

At that moment, our head of lab returned with a weary look on her face. "I'm back. The briefing session was uneventful. The intelligence department's prior analysis seemed to be accurate."

Management had it rough. Meetings, briefings, and debriefings on top of their usual work.

"Your timing could have been better." She must have crossed paths with Torey in the hallway. And he had undoubtedly made her listen to his spiel about proving our valor. From my bitter smile, Reina immediately knew what I was talking about.

"Yeah, he was on his way out. I ordered him back to his position, since the enemy could attack at any moment." She shrugged. Smart move. As expected from Reina.

"By the way, does he come from a family of knights? He was carrying a sword."

"Partially. His family has served the count for multiple generations, sometimes as knights, sometimes as civil officials. They're known to be flexible. And now he's trying to worm his way into the research department," Reina said while stroking her pretty black hair. I was captivated by its smooth movements

as it swayed in the wind. For me, it matched the majesty of a bird flapping its wings.

“So it’s all about prestige. I guess I should feel honored that he chose our department.” The laboratory was naturally attractive as it represented a whole new world of possibilities. “But I don’t like that he’s trying to use it as a means to gain Reina’s hand in marriage.” I let my head fall to the side.

“He’s the opposite of Chief Reina’s type. He’s neither clever nor resourceful.” Belgo nodded and folded his thick arms.

“Belgo, be quiet!” Reina cleared her throat.

“Sorry,” Belgo instantly apologized with a grin.

“I invited Hermes to my place to avoid this exact scenario, but unfortunately that guy can’t read the room.”

“Ha ha, there were guys like him back at the slum. They usually just had some sense punched into them. But you can’t really do that to someone of his status...so I don’t know how to help.”

“Punching sense into him doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Reina commented with a smile. She sounded surprisingly serious. We all burst into laughter. We agreed that it would save us much trouble if we could resort to Belgo’s strategy.

While we were joking, loud, vulgar voices suddenly echoed across the laboratory.

“Uh-oh. Sounds like we’ve got some trouble.”

Shortly after, the angry voices gave way to explosions and the sounds of clashing metal. They were going right at it from the start. But I wasn’t going to tell our people to hold back. This was a fight to secure years of research, the pride and joy of this lab. We could suffer a little damage in return.

As the chief, Reina had of course very responsibly asked her subordinates to “limit any damage to a minimum.” But I had given our staff permission to do as they pleased behind her back, since they would have to fix any damages themselves anyway. As long as there was an irresponsible vice-chief to match the dutiful chief, everything would turn out fine.

For the sake of the internal combustion engine, I hoped the staff would defend the workshop with all their might. Needless to say, I had positioned men ready to fight to the death. The intruders would be in for a surprise.

The battle sounds were now coming from all over the lab, including the hallway just outside the head office. Belgo jumped up and prepared the gun that he had modified himself.

“Is the enemy going all out? There are a lot of attackers.”

“The only people familiar with this lab’s layout are our staff. They probably didn’t know what to expect, so they’re just using brute force,” Reina explained.

Since this lab had been built by the staff, the floor plan was less likely to be leaked. And if the enemy didn’t know the layout, they had likely no choice but to resort to storming the building en masse. Nonetheless, they must have guessed the location of the head office. Important and secured areas were usually located in the same spot in most buildings. And this building was no exception. In other words, they were targeting this room. Or more precisely, the safe that contained all our research plans and results.

While both Reina and I brandished our weapons, a familiar voice reached our ears. It very courteously introduced itself to the assailant, saying stuff like “In the name of Torey Akis, you shall not pass!”

I glanced at Reina, who held her forehead in exasperation. It appeared my suspicions were right. Torey had left his position and was fighting an intruder right outside the office.

“What is that idiot doing?” Reina reflexively murmured.

“Probably just tryin’ to impress you again,” Belgo replied right away. That would match with the idiot’s earlier rant about proving his valor.

But it didn’t seem to be going too well for him. There was a scream accusing the opponent of being a coward. Even if he somehow managed to beat the intruder, he wouldn’t leave a great impression on Reina, who bristled with anger.

Then the hallway went quiet. *What happened?* I glanced at Reina.

“Best-case scenario, he’s dead.”

“Worst-case scenario?”

“He got taken hostage.”

That would indeed be a pain to deal with, so hopefully he’s dead, I found myself wishing. Next to me, Belgo seemed to have reached the same conclusion. He didn’t even have to say anything; it was written all over his face. Unfortunately, our worst-case scenario would be the intruder’s best-case scenario, so they would surely go with that option given the chance. And that chance had clearly been given.

“Don’t move if you value this guy’s life!” the intruder shouted as he entered the room. His voice was muffled from the mask he was wearing.

All three of us probably thought the same thing. *We don’t particularly value his life.* However, our sense of duty stopped us from voicing those thoughts. Reina in particular needed to consider her position as leader. However, there was one person who didn’t seem to care about social etiquette.

“Don’t mind me! I, Torey Akis, would rather die than surrender to the enemy!” the hostage roared. That was probably the best thing I had ever heard him say. But why were his eyes fixed on Reina? “Reina, I can’t cause you any trouble. Shoot me down together with this coward!”

His performance probably would have garnered praise at the theater. But Reina, who was already troubled more than enough, didn’t seem impressed at all. She looked as if she had bitten into a half-baked potato.

Torey continued his performance by belting out lines like “Lay a wreath of flowers at my tomb,” but we just ignored him. I wondered what face the intruder was making under his mask. At the very least, he must have been wishing for his hostage to shut up.

“As you see, your hostage is useless, so what’re you gonna do?” Belgo asked with a gun pointed at the intruder. He *was* aiming for the intruder, right? Not Torey? Torey finally started behaving like a hostage; his face turned pale. *This looks fun. Maybe I should point my gun at them too?*

“You really don’t care?” The intruder tested the waters by pressing his knife

against Torey's neck, but Belgo didn't budge. Neither did Reina or I. In fact, it probably would have been more dangerous for the hostage if we had acknowledged his threats and panicked. *Probably*. Although more than fifty percent was our natural reaction.

"It was pretty naive of you to think you could steal our research by taking our staff hostage. There are no cowards at this lab who would comply with you!" I declared.

"Research is everyone's meat and drink here. We are prepared to sacrifice a couple of lives to protect it," Reina added. Thanks to that attitude, we kept conducting one dangerous experiment after the next! So rapidly that Reina had trouble enforcing her rules.

In short, the intruder, who had shown himself after brazenly taking a hostage, didn't have many choices left.

"Either you free the hostage, and we fight one-on-one, or I blow you away together with your hostage. Which one is it going to be?" I gave him the choice. Albeit with a time limit. I used an oil lamp to set fire to the fuse of the bomb lying on the desk. "Torey, you'll probably survive, just keep your eyes closed."

This bomb would just be bright and loud, so unless we were extremely unlucky, it shouldn't kill anyone. Most likely. We hadn't done many human trials yet.

I threw the bomb. Knowing what would happen, the three of us averted our eyes and plugged our ears. The intruder had also been on alert, but since he didn't know what to expect, he didn't move. Torey didn't seem to know what to expect either. *How do you, as a member of staff, not know what our bombs do? Let me show you.*

The next moment, the sound of an explosion initiated my demonstration. After it was over, the three of us stood up and looked over at the intruder, ready to fire. Both he and Torey had fainted. *Just like the previous experiments!*

"Hermes! Let's tie them up! Chief Reina, you keep us covered with a gun!" Belgo was used to situations like this.

While I followed the expert's orders and approached the intruder, four more

assailants came through the door. So they hadn't been stupid enough to reveal their full strength from the start! Why didn't Torey tell us? If he had enough time to put on a show for Reina, he could have at least told us how many invaders there were. *The head of lab's instructions were to report, keep in contact, and ask for advice whenever possible!*

Without hesitation, Reina fired a shot. Belgo and I rushed behind the desk and sofa. Two of the intruders cowered, while the other two now focused on Reina. They headed toward her. I was losing my cool. Taking shelter was no longer an option.

"Stop looking at my Reina!" I screamed whatever came to mind just to attract the enemy's attention. At the same time, I swung my firearm at him and landed a direct blow with the heavy metal. It looked like my aim had improved from the daily fights at the lab. Then I proceeded to grapple with the invader. I probably should have fired a shot, but I had already dropped my weapon. So I just continued to beat them to a pulp with my bare fists instead.

Don't underestimate the lab staff! Fist fights are a dime a dozen here. Right behind blacksmithing, my specialty was the street fighting technique I had learned from Belgo! That same Belgo was keeping the other guy who had targeted Reina in check.

"Hermes, the safe!" Meanwhile, the remaining two intruders were about to run away with the head office safe. Reina fired another shot, but she missed this time. I couldn't expect her to chase them down by herself. And I was busy dealing with my opponent. Sure, I was sitting on his back, hitting him as hard as I could, but he was still pretty tough.

"Are you two just going to abandon your friends? They're going to have a bad time!" I yelled after them. Although even if they chose to come back and fight, they would still be in for a bad time, especially when faced with Ash!

Of course, they weren't stupid enough to fall for my provocation. The two intruders we had beaten up had recovered and attempted to escape. Belgo and Reina fired their guns one last time, but only one of them hit. In total, three of the intruders had managed to escape. *Damn it! They got away.* I could only pray that some other member of staff would stop them.

Yesterday, I had given my report at the leaders' meeting. Today, I would have loved to rest, but since the head of lab was absent, I had to lead the cleanup efforts.

"That's quite the mess you got here." Saias was shocked to see the paper and broken porcelain scattered all over the floor of the lab. The pitying look on his face stemmed from the knowledge of how much work the cleanup required. Back at the military academy, Mrs. Rihn had made every student clean and do laundry, no matter how much they had objected.

"We've got a lot of staff, so we'll manage. Besides, our chief has trained us well when it comes to cleaning."

"I see Reina's still going strong as everyone's big sister," Saias joked.

"So, why are you here? Is your village safe?"

"Of course! I was a member of the strongest class in the history of the academy! We sent them swimming in the river!"

Saias had protected his own village during the Datara-Yanga attacks. Military reinforcements had arrived late, but it seemed they had done well on their own.

"They attacked three days ago, and we repelled them on the same day. We finished cleaning up too, so I've come to deliver my report. They didn't touch our fields either, so the fall harvest will not be affected." *Really? No damage to the fields? That's a miracle. I heard they attacked at this time of the year because that was their goal.*

"Good job! Send us some potatoes again. The ones from your village are delicious when fried."

"Yeah, fried potatoes are nice. Personally, I prefer croquettes, but yeah, I'll send you some. That's a cheap price for your weapons," Saias chuckled.

I felt relieved at hearing his bright laughter. It didn't seem like the villagers had suffered any serious injuries. Thus I asked for his impressions of the new weapons. "What were the weapons like? I assume no casualties on your side?"

“I didn’t disgrace you,” Saias quipped. “Although we were also lucky that the enemy didn’t bring their bows. They probably underestimated us as peasants. When their cavalry arrived, we were prepared for a prolonged fight, but the flash grenade took care of them.”

“I assume the horses went berserk?” When we had conducted experiments together with the military, their horses had become scared one after the other. While some horses had recently gotten used to the flashes, none of them had been able to deal with the loud bang the first time around.

I wasn’t sure what to think myself, but Glen and some other military officers had said that Sacula would one-sidedly beat down any other regions for quite a while with those new weapons. What an unsettling thought.

But generally, we were pacifists, so we wouldn’t just initiate a war. Unfortunately, our enemies didn’t refrain from attacking. What were those bastards Datara and Yanga planning to do if demons attacked?

“How was the rifle?” That interested me more than the simple bombs. It was difficult to manufacture rifles, and doing so had pushed the lab beyond its limits.

“Scary.” Saias spoke with a hushed voice, as if he had seen a ghost. “With the flick of a finger, I shot down a bandit carrying a fine sword, and he never got back up again.” One shot to take down a soldier with a blade like that. That was impressive. “It still takes some explanations and training, but compared to swords and spears, it’s stupidly easy to use.”

“Did you train any more after returning to your village?”

“Because I knew there would be an attack, I reread the explanations and checked how to load the rifle. Then I did a bit of test shooting.”

“And that’s all it took to achieve this result.”

“Much easier than bows or throwing spears. But I need to practice more if I want to hit my targets on purpose. I only managed to shoot down the enemy because they charged the village as a group from the other side of the river.”

“I imagine.” Even the soldiers who had participated in our experiments from the start couldn’t hit their target one hundred percent of the time. Saias, who

had much fewer chances to practice, couldn't have been better than them. "Do you think the other villagers will be able to use them anytime soon?"

"Hm, good question... I will have to teach them thoroughly, so it will probably take some time. If only they could read the instructions..." It seemed his village was also suffering from a low literacy rate. No wonder Ash put so much effort into expanding education. "But do you really want to give those dangerous weapons to the villagers? Isn't that risky?"

"Of course it's risky." The weapons had exploded repeatedly at the lab too. They were the biggest reason why our sick bay had seen so much foot traffic recently. "Accidents will happen, and people might use them to settle arguments. But if there are more attacks like this, or if—gods forbid—a pack of demons attacks, we can use every bit of help we can get." For example, if the city walls didn't hold, the villagers who had evacuated from the surrounding villages would be drafted to defend Itsutsu.

"Can't argue with that. Even a peasant who's never touched a sword can fight with those rifles."

"Right? Better than hurting themselves or others because they don't know how to handle a spear." Friendly fire could still happen, but you could minimize that risk by lining riflemen up side by side in a row and having them only shoot forward.

"But can you produce enough rifles? They look harder to make than swords."

"You think we can't?" It was no problem if we used all of the lab's machinery to manufacture weapons. Additionally, Itsutsu's blacksmiths had been studying our processes, so if needed, we could mobilize them too. In that case, I would even start worrying about the supply of resources like iron.

"Are you serious? How's this lab so productive?"

"There's only one answer to that. Our chief may be Reina, but do you know who's above her?"

"Ash..." Saias murmured with an enlightened look on his face.

That was the answer. While I was only thinking about advancing the technology, Ash racked his brains trying to spread it as widely as possible. As

part of his efforts, he had come up with plans to mass produce the new weapons if needed.

“It’s thanks to him that you were able to ward off the attack with your rifle.”

“I’m always perplexed by what Ash’s doing. I find myself thinking what a strange fellow he is, but in hindsight, his strangeness always saves our butts.”

Well said. He always showed us the road ahead, making sure we didn’t get lost and fall off a cliff or get trapped inside a cave.

“He wanted a weapon capable of killing a hundred demons and preventing any casualties on our side, and looking at the results, I think it might actually be possible.”

“This rifle might actually pull it off. Even if something like that is unprecedented,” Saias agreed.

“But that’s Ash. Always trying to do the impossible.” He motivated everyone to push beyond their limits. And compared to making an airplane fly, most things seemed quite easy to achieve anyway.

“This place really got turned into one big mess,” Saias said while looking around the room. “Is everyone all right? Nobody got injured?”

“You might think so, judging from all this damage, but we’re fine. Looks far worse than it was.” Saias looked at me in disbelief. “I’m not lying. Where do you think the explosives and rifles you used to protect your village came from?”

“No way. You used them inside?”

“Ash scolded me, but there were too many enemies. We were protecting our research. So we used anything we could lay our hands on to fight back.” As a result, the lab had been turned upside down, but the staff had gotten away with only light injuries. “Although they managed to take the safe. They were quite tenacious and didn’t know when to give up.”

“Wait, wait. Your research got stolen? How are you fine?”

“Don’t worry. It’s useless to them.” The intruders had stolen a decoy safe, which we had prepared for cases like this. We had made sure that the comparatively light decoy had stood out. It contained forged documents,

random plans, and theories meticulously crafted by the lab staff. The real safe was located below the decoy, and it was too heavy for just a few humans to carry.

“So, no unexpected damages?”

“With all those filthy spies roaming around, there’s no way we wouldn’t have a counterplan in place.” Although ideally the enemy shouldn’t even have been able to touch the decoy. There were more intruders than expected, and we hadn’t paid any attention to material damages, so they had bested us.

In addition, it seemed that they had stolen some documents on the steam engines, which that knucklehead Rockel had left lying out in the open. That idiot. I had told him to put them away properly. I will have to get Reina to scold him later.

In the end, the lab was staffed with civilians, and we had faced more enemies than expected. At the leaders’ meeting, they had said we had done a great job.

“By the way, where’s Reina? I expected to hear her lively voice telling the lab staff to clean up this mess.”

“She’s at Maika’s place.” Reina still hadn’t fully recovered from the attack. She may be strong, but she wasn’t used to fighting. She must have been shocked at having participated in the combat herself.

Thus, she was currently resting with the incredibly strong Maika. *Hopefully, she’ll recover soon...*

Reina’s Perspective

“Reina, are you okay?” Maika asked.

I was unable to properly answer my friend’s question. I was lying face down on Maika’s bed. After a while, my trembling vocal chords finally managed to squeeze something out.

“Ha, ha ha, ha ha ha...bwa ha ha!” I broke out into laughter. I couldn’t hold my delight back any longer. “He said ‘my Reina.’ He he...my Reina...he he he!”

After the intruders had entered the head office, Hermes had screamed those

words when they had targeted me. Hermes, that blockhead who only ever thinks about his engines! As far as I could tell, he had just said it in the spur of the moment, but that just meant those were his unfiltered thoughts!

“He said I was his...”

I had repeated those words countless times since Maika had taken me in last night. I knew I should probably stop. But I wanted to say them! Over and over again! Hermes’s voice was still ringing in my ears. *I might faint again.*

“Yeah, you’re not ready to leave yet. You’ll stay another night,” Maika declared in an exasperated voice and sighed.

I wasn’t here because I was feeling unwell. On the contrary, I was too elated to be let outside!



Did I feel bad about not helping during such a critical time? No, it was my legitimate right to bask in this joy. I was always giving my all as the head of the Territory Reform Promotion Office's affiliated laboratory, so I deserved some time off! I wasn't going to ruin this moment—lasting twenty-four hours and counting—with work!

"You understand, don't you, Maika? You must have felt like this when Ash first said 'my Maika' to you!"

"I understand. Almost too well. At work, I keep finding myself with a wide grin whenever I remember that moment. And it doesn't lose any impact the second time either!"

"A second time! I'm shaking just thinking about him saying it again!"

Those two idiots who had devoted their entire lives to their dreams. Usually, they only talked about achieving their goals. So hearing them profess their love was priceless. Even if it was just a single word. *Do you realize how rare that is?* Hermes only ever looked up into the sky, dreaming of obtaining those iron wings. You could barely hold a proper conversation with him. He never noticed when I changed my hairstyle or wore new clothes. Even though he jumped at any minor changes in the alloy mixture of his wings during development. That idiot's perception was warped.

"Finally, after all this time...that idiot noticed me!" I took over as leader of the lab, supported his dreams, always had his back, and got rid of any obstacles in his way...and he had never properly noticed me until now. I often wondered why I had to go through so much trouble. It was a mystery to me.

"Just why. Why did I have to fall for..." My tears didn't stop flowing. The more I thought about it the more I cried. "Why did I have to fall in love with someone like him?"

I didn't like boasting, but I could have easily boasted about the number of people asking for my hand in marriage. Even now, I had lots of suitors. I had come from a good family, and I was well educated and trained. Sure, I was quite obstinate and not as lovable as Maika, but I was confident in my looks.

Normally, if I had made a move, I should not have needed to worry about

getting turned down. But because I had fallen for Hermes, I had even gotten my parents involved in my year-long plan to win him over.

“Yeah, he’s a dense idiot,” Maika whispered while gently hugging me. I nodded repeatedly.

He was an idiot. But I was an idiot too. I had always thought I knew how to swim with the tide. I didn’t know I was the kind of fool who would obsess over one person. Even delay my marriage plans and get emotional over that guy saying, “my Reina.” If Hermes knew how stupid I was, he would probably hate me.

“But you love Hermes, don’t you?”

“I do. I love him a lot...” Whenever Hermes got involved, I just wasn’t myself. Just like Maika with Ash. I hated the fact that he made me feel so anxious, yet I somehow also loved that about him.

“Then you don’t have to worry,” Maika reassured me while rubbing my back. “Hermes needs you to balance him out, and you need him. You’re a perfect match,” she declared. Those were the words I wanted to hear above all else. I felt a smile come over my face. However, Maika was still a very competitive person. “Even if you’re not as perfect as Ash and me,” my younger friend added.

I usually took a step back and just let Maika have her small victories. After all, I was her elder. And besides, she was the count’s granddaughter and future leader of Sacula herself, whereas I was the daughter of the count’s servants. But. But.

“I can’t let you have that one!” This was the one thing that I wasn’t prepared to let go. I cried and hugged her as tightly as I could. *Be crushed, my dear friend.* In return, she hugged me even tighter, and I conceded on the spot. I was no match for her fighting strength.

Paper Thunder

One week later, things had returned to normal. While the fight in Itsutsu had only lasted one day, the soldiers outside the city took a bit longer to deal with the decoy bandits who had been attempting to spread our forces thin. They finally returned home after spending a week repelling the enemy and cleaning up the region.

“This proves yet again that one shouldn’t pick a fight with Sacula...” Lady Seire muttered in a weary voice during the Sacula leaders’ debriefing. She was stating her opinion as a Sukuna resident rather than representative of the intelligence department. She held the damage reports for the recent battles in her hands.

In summary, our food stockpiles had decreased, and we had lost some equipment. In addition, the decoy safe was stolen from the laboratory. Many people suffered minor wounds, but thanks to the military reinforcements sent to each village, there were only a few serious injuries or deaths.

The enemy foot soldiers had somewhat better skills and equipment than the average bandit, yet they were still not much of a challenge for Sacula soldiers. They bled when pierced with a spear and died when their heads were severed—unlike some demons who did not even flinch when stabbed and whose heads and bodies both kept fighting even when separated.

“There have been a lot less attacks recently, but we are still the kingdom’s bulwark against the demons. So a battle like this is child’s play.” Lord Itsuki did not sound worried at all.

“Even if our region is known to be proficient in human combat, I think we would have suffered more casualties in an all-out battle. Additionally, the rebuild efforts would have taken much longer...” Lady Seire sighed for the umpteenth time upon realizing that Sacula had already returned to business as usual.

“The cleanup efforts went so smoothly because Sir Fenix’s former classmates are enlisted in the military,” Mrs. Rihn said with a boastful smile, reminiscing

about her days as dorm supervisor. “We don’t call them the most talented class in the history of the academy for nothing. Immediately after our victory, they were already writing up damage reports on-site and compiling lists of the resources needed to rebuild.”

“As their supervisor, I very much appreciate that I can rely on them to use their own judgment to complete the necessary tasks. Of course, it would have been impossible without the help of the civil servants who swiftly distributed all the resources.” Sir George offered Mrs. Rihn’s department a compliment in return.

“And we, too, have Sir Fenix’s former classmates working with us.” I could not help but feel proud of my former classmates for becoming such valuable assets on the front lines.

“It’s all circling back to Sir Fenix’s influence in the end... I’m not sure what to say...”

“It’s just Ash being Ash,” Lord Itsuki wrapped up their discussion with reckless laughter. At the same time, the look on his face betrayed his concerns. “Still... I’d never thought there’d be so much raw human conflict. Including the Yanga revolt too. Times have changed.”

“Luckily it didn’t attract any demons,” Sir George, the representative of the military, said grimly.

The demons were the reason why there was so little human conflict in this world. Even though demons had little to do with human society, it was said that they were attracted to interpersonal strife. This was not just folklore, but common knowledge. Fortunately, our recent battle had not prompted their intervention.

There were many examples in history where two regions at war had both been annihilated by demons in the aftermath. *Like enemy mobs in a fantasy game*. Since demon attacks threatened the existence of all humanity, human conflicts were instead settled with duels. As a result, dueling culture was thriving with tournaments all over the kingdom. As a civilized person myself, though, I would have preferred everyone to resolve their issues by talking to one another.

Lord Itsuki, who was just as civilized, reclined in his chair and grumbled with a gloomy look on his face, “I guess that’s the flip side of the coin. Fifty years ago, it must have seemed like a dream come true when demon attacks waned...”

“If I may interject,” Lady Seire spoke up apologetically, “those in Sacula might think of it as having been fifty years, but those in the central regions likely haven’t suffered any damage from demons for even longer.”

“Because we have acted as their shield.” Lord Itsuki grimaced sourly. It seemed like he had a lot on his mind following recent events.

“Should we organize a demon experience tour for the central nobles?” I joked to lighten the mood. But Lord Itsuki seemed to show genuine interest and inquired about costs. “We would just have to escort them toward the Roaring Dragon Mountains, so travel expenses and road maintenance fees should cover it.”

“That’s cheap...” Since he was starting to seriously consider it as an option, I brought him back to his senses by mentioning that there probably would not be any volunteers. “That’s a shame. And here I thought I could legally get rid of some annoyances...”

“I agree with the sentiment, but we should focus on a more realistic form of retaliation.”

“You’re right,” Lord Itsuki agreed. “Basically, I want to take the fight to the capital. Since that’s where both the puppet Viscount Yanga and his puppeteer Marquis Datara are located. Do you have any ques— Yes, Ash.”

“Would that not put us at a disadvantage, since the capital is their stomping grounds?” Unlike me, the sort of person who politely raised his hand to ask a question, Viscount Yanga and Marquis Datara were not known for their good manners. I had witnessed their impoliteness firsthand during my visit to the capital. They were the kind of people who shook your hands with a smile while stepping on your toes.

“That is a legitimate concern, but recently things have changed. Her Highness is a big fan of yours,” Lord Itsuki explained. Lady Alicia was indeed a beloved friend and ally, but that was the first time I had heard her referred to as my fan. *What an honor for a knight like me to have such an esteemed fan!*

“If I may,” Lady Seire interjected, before clearing her throat and glancing at me. “I heard that it was you who helped weaken Marquis Datará’s influence and thus create opportunities for Her Highness to prove herself. You spread a rumor that his metal production had declined.”

Now that she mentioned it... Although anything the princess was up to was merely a by-product of my actions, so I only faintly remembered it. And my rumor had not left much of an impression either, since the marquis had mostly just self-destructed.

“Those were just lucky coincidences. I was merely present when they happened.”

“If you say so, I won’t press it any further... At any rate, the influence of our adversary Marquis Datará is waning, while our ally Her Highness Princess Alicia is steadily gaining support. Even if we engage the Datará faction in the capital, we won’t be at a disadvantage.”

“That is a very reassuring analysis,” I commented. *Time to sing ‘God Save the Queen.’ Or ‘princess’ in this case? ‘Goddess’ works too if I dedicate it to Yuika. Or would that be blasphemy?*

“Now we just need to gather enough evidence and testimonies to justify our charges against Marquis Datará...” Lady Seire continued the conversation with Lord Itsuki while I was repenting for my sins against Goddess Yuika.

“Don’t worry too much about that, Lady Seire.”

“Oh, do you have an effective technique to extract information?”

“That stuff’s Ash’s specialty. Even the most skilled spy behaves like a scared child at the graveyard when faced with him.” *I don’t remember specializing in that field.* He made it sound like I was some kind of sadist used to interrogating prisoners.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am neither an interrogator nor torturer, so unfortunately that falls outside my field of expertise.”

“Ash, didn’t you want to test some of those new drugs and medical tools you developed? We can’t feed all those prisoners. You can treat them like convicts who were sentenced to death.”

“I do have quite a long back catalog, so I would be glad to conduct some experiments.” I did, however, specialize in medical experiments. They could be my 338th-plus guinea pigs. *Could I extract some information in the process? Hm, I guess I could try, but it'll only be secondary to the experiment. Don't expect too much of a mere scientist.*

After I agreed to interrogate the prisoners, Maika, who had remained silent up until this point, raised her hand with a wide grin on her face. Before the chairman had given permission to speak, her excited voice echoed across the room, “I’m glad I captured Moldo and his friend alive. They’ll make great test subjects!” Her smile was as bright as a calamitous supernova.

At the end of winter, when the annual hellish period at the administration offices had finished, Maika and I headed to the capital. This time, Lord Itsuki was going to stay behind. He still had a lot of work to finish before spring, so we let him attend to his own business.

Up until the morning of our departure, Lord Itsuki had implored us to “Stay one more day! I just need you to help me one more day!” but unfortunately, His Excellency the Count wanted to meet Maika “as soon as possible.” Thus, the acting count had to gulp back his tears.

Besides, it was rare for Lord Itsuki to be this busy. He had not been this preoccupied since I had first arrived in Itsutsu. As Sir George and Mrs. Rihn had pointed out, the younger generation, including me and my former classmates, had helped make his life much easier.

Nevertheless, his workload had increased with the Yanga-Datara problem, and he was having to deal with more military and domestic affairs than usual. *Hang in there. It'll be most convenient for me if you do.*

When we arrived at the Sacula residence in the capital, we were greeted by its owner, who had eagerly awaited Maika in the lobby.

“Grandfather, you look healthy as always!”

“Maika! I missed you! I heard you put on a lively display amidst the chaos!” Apparently, beating up an entire insurrectionist faction counted as a “lively display” to those in the Sacula family. I needed to update my definition of

“lively.”

After an endearing hug, initiated by the doting grandfather, he looked at me and about twenty percent of the count’s face reverted back to business mode. “Ash, great to see you. I heard you proved yourself worthy as my granddaughter’s fiancé during the revolt. I’m glad I can rely on you.”

“I am honored, Your Excellency.” It was extremely difficult to stick to “Your Excellency” seeing him behave so dotingly. To prevent myself from having to call the count “granddad,” I went to greet an old friend waiting at the back of the residence.

“Long time no see, Arthur. How have you been?”

“Ash...” the princess dressed as a boy pensively called out my name. Her cheeks flushed, and it seemed the words had gotten stuck in her throat.

“Sacula’s traffic has improved a lot recently.” I couldn’t help but feel moved seeing my friend like that. “I have asked Sukuna to put in place a similar transport network...so it should be easier to travel between Sacula and the capital in the near future.”

“Oh!” she rejoiced. *I guess I’ll have to work even harder to complete the transport network!* I offered my hand up to shake, and Lady Alicia tightly squeezed it to make sure it was real. “Yeah, this is truly not a dream. I missed you, Ash!” Lady Alicia spoke in a tone that did not entirely match her Arthur disguise, probably because she felt at ease surrounded by trustworthy friends and allies within the Sacula residence.

“I missed you too. I wish we could have met under happier circumstances,” I reciprocated with a wry smile. “I am sorry to trouble you at this time.” I apologized for requesting her help with the Yanga-Datara problem.

“You’re not troubling me at all! I hear they targeted you directly this time?” Lady Alice’s joyous expression adopted a hint of anger.

“There were a lot of different circumstances involved, but ultimately, their frontline troops were out to get me.” Although I doubt it was the mastermind Marquis Datara’s intention to target me. His main objective was to destabilize the Sacula region and depose the count’s family. However, Lady Alicia only

seemed to care about the results.

“He can target me all he wants, but I won’t forgive him for trying to hurt you.” I was lucky to have such a caring friend. But why did it feel like she was about to burn everything to the ground? Were those the flames of friendship?

“It looks like you worried quite a bit.”

“Of course! I thought my heart had stopped when I heard that they were trying to kill you! Even if I didn’t expect them to succeed.”

“Huh?” So, what had she been worried about if she did not think they could kill me?

While I racked my brains to comprehend what Lady Alicia meant, Maika, who had finished greeting her grandfather, joined us. Happy to see her friend again, a mixture of relief and pride came over Maika’s face.

“It’s been a while. Glad to see you’re well.”

“You too, Maika. I heard you protected Ash. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t mention it. I told you before that I would protect Ash for the both of us!”

“Thanks. You’re the only person I could ask to do such a thing.”

“Just leave it to me. In return, I’ll rely on you for all the things I can’t do.”

The two hugged. They fostered a very warm and supportive friendship. I had been unaware of their promise to each other, but it was probably not meant for my male ears anyway. Ever since the academy days, they had often met up in my absence, so they had a long shared history.

“What happened to the people who targeted Ash?”

“I disposed of them. After they gave us what we wanted.”

“Glad to hear that they were of some use.”

“Yeah, I’m glad it wasn’t all in vain.”

They whispered and giggled among themselves, giving off a sweet yet scary aura. *Like characters out of a horror movie. Not monsters going on a rampage, but more like witches who charmed their victims in order to capture and devour*

them. Exciting stuff.

As I was observing the two, His Excellency patted my back and whispered into my ear, “You’re surrounded by strong women.”

“Yeah, I am lucky,” I replied without hesitation, upon which the count gave me a puzzled look.

Huh? Did I say something wrong?

After the emotional reunion, it was time to take care of the reason why we had come to the capital in the first place: the Yanga-Datara problem. Lady Alicia had disguised herself as Arthur to take part in our strategy meeting. It was already certain that we were going to crush our enemy, we just needed to discuss how to go about it. I had asked our faction in the capital to coordinate in advance. Thus, the meeting started with a status report, given by the very lax—I mean laid-back—leader of the Sacula region.

“First, all the frontier regions have expressed their desire to join the Frontier Alliance. It is possible that some leaders are secretly working with Marquis Datara, but I’m not sure how that would benefit them...” Count Sacula scratched his head. “Most of them have stopped going to Marquis Datara’s parties. So, I don’t think we need to worry.”

“You said most, so some still attended?” I asked.

“Yeah, they loudly denounced the marquis while drinking with me. Officer Raino was one of them.”

“You are right. No need to worry.”

It seemed there were those who had not attended the party because they hated him and those who had attended to let the marquis know how much they loathed him. The frontier regions’ leaders’ hatred of the central nobles was terrifying. Our allies were no doubt extremely fed up with the way they were treated in the capital.

At this rate, any traitors would, at most, report the content of our discussions. If they supported the marquis beyond that, they risked damaging future diplomatic relations. And while there may have been some rivalries between

the frontier regions, they were still neighbors in a lot of cases. And it was important to have good relations with your neighbors.

“Moreover, Viscount Sukuna and Baron Nepton have moved to reconcile their interests. The former behind the scenes, the latter openly. For now, it looks like the foundations of our alliance are stable.”

Officer Raino, the very energetic coordinator of the Frontier Alliance, was known as a shrewd diplomat. She had dropped hints that she would appreciate an increase in liquor production. Apparently, many people from the Nepton region, the coordinator included, loved having a drink or two. *Fine by me.*

Their region was situated next to the coast and known for its warm climate. I knew they were cultivating grapes, so they would probably be happy if we installed a brandy or grappa distillery there.

Since it seemed that the Frontier Alliance was as strong as ever, all that was left to worry about was its influence in the capital. Lady Alicia, who talked partially in her capacity as princess and partially as Arthur, gave an update in that regard.

“It’s remarkable how much you managed to reduce Marquis Datara’s influence. Not long ago, he was beyond even the royal family’s control. The central nobles are all in awe that a frontier region brought him down to a more equal footing. It makes it very clear who is more skilled.”

The reason for Marquis Datara’s declining power was his slumping economy. Despite the fact that he had very obviously sent assassins after members of the royal family, he had managed to retain his power in the capital thanks to his wealth. If someone opposed him, he just stopped their circulation of goods, pushing major businesses toward bankruptcy until the dissidents shut up.

The marquis’s wealth had been sustained by the monopolies held by his allies. The merchants selling soap and Count Batsuka, who had dominated the liquor industry, had all been friends of the House of Datara.

He had built his wealth thanks to the large amounts of metal he had obtained from subjugating packs of werewolves. And he had further increased his wealth by investing it. While there was nothing wrong with the way in which he had run his business, he had made too many enemies.

In return for the House of Datara's investments, his subordinates were tasked with preventing any trade secrets from leaking, using brute strength if necessary, and intimidating anyone who independently came up with the same techniques. *Sounds a bit like the mafia.*

He could have learned a thing or two from Mr. Quid. The more the former peddler's company had grown, the humbler he had become. Besides, it was counterproductive to solely focus on protecting your monopolies instead of developing new inventions.

They seemed to be relying on their existing products like a turtle would its shell. But when their monopolies crumbled, they were left with no countermeasures. Most had been broken by Sacula: soap, liquor, high quality ink, and paper, to name a few. However, the reason for their abrupt decline in clients was no doubt Datara's unpleasant attitude. Accordingly, the products with the phoenix emblem sold extremely well in the capital despite the extra charge incurred by the transport from the Sacula region.

"While it may be an amazing feat to be on equal footing with the marquis, I think we should aim for the odds to be seven to three in our favor before challenging him." Everyone agreed with Lady Alicia's assessment, based on theory taught at the academy. "In that case, we need to continue laying the groundwork. Luckily, I know some people who are eager to meet with the House of Sacula, or I should say Ash."

"All right, Ash, go meet 'em," His Excellency ordered before hearing the details. *What tyranny! What rash judgment! Oh, the disregard for human rights!* Okay, maybe that went a bit too far, but I wished he had at least heard her out before making a decision.

Lady Alicia seemingly agreed. She smiled wryly before adding, "They have been friendly with us all along, so there's no need to worry. And I think Ash will enjoy talking to them." Who could that be? "I'm talking about the Church. It seems the Royal Temple's head priest wants to talk to you, Ash." *That does sound like a fun chat.*

I had already met several priests and trainees from the Royal Temple, and every one of them had been a wonderful person like Mother Yae and Dr. Lusus

—with maybe a couple of exceptions—and I had enjoyed talking to them. But the Royal Temple’s head priest occupied the highest rank of this world’s clergy. *I can’t help but feel nervous.*

The agitated voices of middle-aged men echoed across the Royal Temple’s assembly hall, one of the building’s most exquisite rooms.

“Sir Fenix, are you saying that the Church’s doctrine is useless?”

“If you had listened carefully to what I just said, I am sure you would have understood what I mean.” *Calm down, you idiot, I didn’t say that.* I had tried to make my thoughts sound a little more polite, yet the high priest’s bald head still turned red. How come they did not understand the essential points of my argument, but grasped the implied meaning of my retort? *Strange fellows.*

Since most of those who had gathered were high priests, the average age in the room was quite elevated. Given that their job was to govern the other priests, it was only natural that most were senior members of the clergy.

There were some younger priests and trainees in the auditorium, but they did not hold the right to speak. I had spotted Dr. Lusus and Ms. Tris, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

“Let me ask you then, Father...Aguri?” I glanced at Father Folke sitting next to me to confirm that I had gotten the name right. After he nodded, I continued, “Father Aguri, in what way do you think the doctrine is useful?”

“The three gods guide us through a peaceful life with few worries.” Faith in the three gods did not equal the Church’s doctrine. Mother Yae had told me as much. However, since that was not the focus of our discussion, I let it slide. Luckily, I was a rational person.

“Could you elaborate on that point? For example, what does a peaceful life with few worries look like?” Someone on the verge of starvation probably did not worry about much else besides food, so in a way they were living a life with few worries. If you provided them with a single meal, they would experience a huge peace of mind. In other words, the high priest’s words were just meaningless drivel.

“Live with a smile—”

“Could you be a bit more detailed?” His vague answer could easily be applied to any wretched person who might laugh at the misfortune of others.

I had asked them to reevaluate an old request from Sacula’s temple to include more accessible books in the regional libraries. Why was he still giving such general replies? How were they this slow? No wonder they kept engaging in the same meaningless activities and seemed to have no idea what was going on in the provinces.

“Sir Fenix, when would you consider our doctrine to be useful then?”

“When it helps people stuff their bellies.” Even better if the food was delicious. But upon hearing my clear opinion, the assembly hall fell silent and all the agitated voices died down.

The only exceptions were my acquaintances, who burst out laughing. And while the laughter from the auditorium did not attract too much attention, Father Folke next to me stood out like a sore thumb.

For approximately ten seconds, the assembly hall was so silent—apart from a bit of chuckling—that the wild uproar from moments earlier almost seemed like a dream. Finally, Father Aguri broke the silence. The bald-headed priest slammed his hands upon the desk and stood up as if he were trying to reignite the debate. “The... The Church’s doctrine doesn’t bother with such trivial matters!”

Bong. The bells of war were ringing in my mind. He had made a fatal mistake.

“Oh? What did you just say?” *I dare you to repeat it.* I was waiting for him to offer me the cue for an all-out attack.

He was trembling. Unfortunately, it was a bit too late to back out. His left foot had already stepped on the landmine. With a grin, I dared Father Aguri to put his right foot on it too. There was no going back.

“You said that food was a trivial matter.” Since Father Aguri did not give me my cue, I just took it myself. *Time for a holy war. Bring out the guillotine!* “Does that mean that the exalted high priests, who devote their lives to the three gods, do not eat? Do you use your mouths exclusively to extol the gods and

spread their word among the people?” *Marvelous. I had found humans who had defied the laws of conservation of energy and evolved past the need for food intake.* “I did not know that the Church was run by people with such extraordinary abilities. Would you be able to teach us your secret technique? I am sure the starving people would cry tears of joy. I would love to know it myself.” Was it just devotion? Or a secret ritual?

“I-I didn’t mean to say that we don’t need to eat at all...”

“Oh, you did not? Then do you mean to say you engage in such trivial matters on a daily basis yourself? Please enlighten me, but why does such an exalted clergyman like you need to concern himself with such trivial matters?” *Stop mumbling and reply already. What happened to your fast-talking?*

As Father Aguri was trying to come up with a reply, the high priest sitting at the top seat—in other words, the head priest—prepared to say something. However, the delinquent priest sitting next to me preempted him.

“Your Excellency, the exalted Father Aguri made a reckless statement,” said Father Folke, who occupied the lowest rank in the assembly hall, and he casually shook his head in disapproval. *That delinquent attitude still suits him.* “Sir Fenix’s response may have lacked some refinement, but you have to remember that he was born in a village where food shortages led to malnourishment and death year after year.”

The assembly hall once again fell silent upon hearing from the priest who had spent several years in my birthplace. Although it was a different kind of silence than earlier. Father Folke lightly patted my back as if to say I should not overdo it. It seemed he had mellowed a bit living in the capital. *Darn it. Now I can’t tease him without feeling bad.* Thus I felt obligated to seize the opportunity that Father Folke had created.

“My apologies. I got a little too heated. Exalted Father Aguri, please forgive me.” After accusing him earlier, I now took a step backward. Maybe I could make him feel guilty by asserting my dominance. “I meant to say that I believe the Church’s goal should be to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter to the entire population. And food, or ‘stuffing your belly,’ is the top priority. One can manage to live in a slightly shabby house wearing tattered clothes. But

everyone needs to eat properly.” *Don’t you agree that this “trivial matter” is an essential, Father Aguri?* I shot a conciliatory glance at the bald high priest, who swiftly nodded in agreement. *Good. I’m asserting dominance.*

“Back in Noscula village, my birthplace, we had a collection of books provided in accordance with the Church’s doctrine. I read all of them.” I paused and looked at Father Folke, who looked to be reminiscing as well. “But most of those books were useless.” The most useful one was the botanical guide. “My village lacked both the knowledge and resources for the books’ information to be useful.” What good was an agricultural guide on nitrogen fertilizer, if there was no fertilizer at all? I still remembered how puzzled I was. “This was the case in my village, but the same applies to the libraries in the regional capitals. Those books are useless treasures. In my opinion, if you want to promulgate the Church’s doctrine and implement its teachings, the system needs to be reformed.” I concluded my appeal, pitching forward with my hands on the desk.

In response, the head priest nodded demonstratively and stood up. Had I reached him? “Your opinion is of great interest. It merits an investigation of utmost priority.” The head priest, who held the final say, had chosen deliberately serious words. Their weight was emphasized by the fact that the secretary, who had been recording everything said at the assembly hall, paused for a moment before writing them down.

“It is indeed problematic to send books all over the kingdom that even we here at the Royal Temple don’t understand,” another high priest spoke up in a flustered voice. “I mean there are many abstruse texts among our collection, which, um, we preserve at the temple, but... Oh, right. If we are going to reevaluate our system, maybe we should start by investigating the problem that many people don’t read any books in the first place, especially in the remote regions.”

His statement did not fully make sense. The beginning and the end were loosely connected, but he had talked rapidly to make it sound more coherent than it was. I assumed he was probably embarrassed by his initial statement that he didn’t understand many of the books at the Royal Temple. However, ignorance was the beginning of wisdom.

To clear up any remaining doubts, I proceeded to ask, “Could that problem

not be solved by properly teaching them how to read and write?”

The head priest smiled awkwardly at my comment. “We should also investigate the effectiveness of our current education system.”

“It should be possible to rapidly increase the literacy rate given that there is a church in every village,” I added. The high priest whose statement had not made much sense sneered as if he had just listened to the pipe dream of a small child. Was he making fun of me? I had a hunch about why that self-professed city dweller was looking down upon my comment, so I decided to go in for the kill. “Currently, in my village the literacy rate of the generation below mine is above seventy percent.”

What happened? His smirk, implying that I was just an ignorant child, had suddenly vanished. His big city dweller arrogance must have led him to believe that all the peasants were illiterate. Did I need to remind him who it was that developed all those new inventions and destroyed all those monopolies? I assumed he knew it was not someone from the royal capital.

“It was thanks to the passionate teachings of Father Folke. The churches just need capable leaders like him to function as intended.”

“Ash’s— Sir Fenix’s words flatter me, but I would not have been able to do it without him. The other children only showed interest after he had taken the lead. There is still a general antipathy to studying.”

I tried to promote the Folke school of teaching, but he immediately countered with a display of modesty. He had seen through my plan to install him as a member of the investigative committee to dismantle the Church’s current education system.

Although if you took a closer look, there were several other reasons for the high literacy rate. For example, my successes in Itsutsu had stimulated the children’s desire to learn, and the overall improvement of Sacula’s food distribution had given the children more free time. There was no doubt that it was the result of good fortune and years of effort. But if I went into detail now, I would just be dragging the meeting out, so I kept it to myself.

“Of course, if you are going to investigate the education system, I would gladly cooperate by offering a report on our region’s endeavors.” *In return for*

some favors. Although I did not say that part out loud.

After some more self-professed city people had put on display the cracks in their illogical pride, the meeting ended. I did not understand how people who had not helped build the capital could feel any pride just for being born and raised there.

After the long meeting had ended, Head Priest Father Birkan came to greet me. “Sir Fenix. Today’s discussion was very fruitful. The royal capital desperately needs fresh points of view like yours.”

“It is an honor to be of help to the Church, to which I owe so much.” I was grateful toward the head priest who, while upholding his neutrality, had reacted favorably to my opinions during the meeting.

“If you have time, I would love to talk to you later. In private.”

According to Lady Alicia, who had acted as an intermediary to the Church, the head priest was eager to reform the system. I was exhausted from the long discussion, but it appeared I had to motivate myself for another round. I felt just a little bit nervous.

“So the priests cannot take the initiative to investigate the contents of the books?” I was met with a very unfortunate reply to my inquiry.

“I am afraid not. At least not for the next fifty years. That is unfortunately how the Church’s system is set up.” The head priest sympathetically shook his head upon seeing my discouraged expression.

“That is a shame. Your priests would have been of great help.. Not only do they have the required fundamental knowledge, but also the curiosity and logical mindset to complete the task.”

“I am flattered. Hearing your high praise, it pains me even more that I cannot meet your expectations,” he lamented with a calm voice befitting a guardian of knowledge.

His attire was not very different from that of the average priests and trainees. While it was made from top-quality cloth, its design was plain, and it lacked any kind of gold or silver jewelry. Of course, he probably had other outfits for formal

dinners and rituals. But I liked his modest appearance.

And he was very easy to talk to. Why had I felt nervous at all? I should not always assume the worst of strangers. That was a vice of mine.

“It is thanks to a group of greedy priests that the Church has become such an irrational institution. Eventually they left and became merchants and feudal lords, but their origins lie here.” More precisely, he was talking about the soap merchants and Count Batsuka. It appeared that they had been working toward acquiring their monopolies ever since their time as priests. *Or former monopolies, I should say.*

“If it was just their own research that they had profited from, then the clergy probably wouldn’t have imposed such strict restrictions...”

“As a researcher myself, I cannot forgive anyone who steals and profits off other people’s work.”

“It is completely understandable that you would think like that in your position, Sir Fenix. That is why priests are no longer allowed to conduct research themselves.”

Instead, they had to go about it in a roundabout way. For example, Dr. Lusus and Ms. Tris were not priests but priests-in-training. The Church paid for their living expenses and, alongside their other generous sponsor, provided the funds for their research. But neither was a priest. Merely trainees.

Father Folke, also known as the delinquent priest, was indeed, as his name suggested, a full-fledged priest. Therefore, he was not doing any research. His duties were the maintenance and preservation of books, so he was not allowed to do any research. Father Folke was only allowed to rack his brain deciphering the ancient language because it was necessary to manage the collection. Without knowing the contents, it was not possible to properly organize the books or copy them. It may have seemed like research, but it was counted as part of his regular duties. *Yeah, it’s basically just sophistry. Everyone is trying to find a loophole.*

The manager of the system let out a heavy sigh. “I realize that it’s not the best solution. However, thanks to a few misguided fellows, the Church’s *raison d’être* has come into question.”

At the time, the Church had received much criticism, and there were even records of physical attacks on temples. Although the assailants had not been enraged citizens, but instead those who had used the controversy as a pretext to steal assets and research results from the temple. They were the same kind of opportunistic people as Marquis Datara. The Church, whose mission it was to guard the books and knowledge, had turned itself into a target. As a result, quite a number of books had gone missing and the Church's reputation had suffered.

"In order to protect the Church's vast and unique book collection, we didn't have much of a choice. In our own way, we were already aware that we had paid a heavy price." The head priest glanced at me with a bittersweet smile. "But you showed us how heavy it truly was. Your countless inventions and discoveries are astounding."

"Really? I would have thought you had a good idea of what is possible, given the Church's extensive collection. My knowledge is also based on your libraries' books." Some of my ideas may have stemmed from my past-life knowledge, but I would not have been able to put them into practice on my own. For example, I had known about cement but not what raw materials it contained or how to properly mix them together. I had needed to research the process with books from the temple library.

"Hearing that, I can only say that we lost face... With every misguided priest, the restrictions increased, and as more and more time passed, we found ourselves caught in our own trap. We're unable to distinguish between dreams and reality. Excluding a handful of researchers."

Was it that simple? But that may be the natural course of things given enough time. Ultimately, I had a big advantage knowing that certain things were possible due to my past-life memories. This also showed the genius of people like Hermes who chased their dreams without that advantage. I felt a little guilty that he looked up to me.

"Anyway, Sir Fenix." The Church's leader—whose power rivaled that of the king, considering that his organization's influence stretched across all the regions—held out his hand. "As a representative of the Church, I have been meaning to express my gratitude to you in person. Thank you for carrying out

our original mission of bringing the knowledge of the ancient civilization to the present.”

“Your words honor me.” I shook the head priest’s hand as I thought back on the Church’s interesting origin story.

Since it was a religious organization, it unsurprisingly involved a mystical entity, but it wasn’t any of the three gods. It began with a large tree, also known as the World Tree. More than a thousand years ago, it addressed humans with the following words: “Chaos will befall this world, and many things will be lost. Prepare accordingly. Gather and preserve as much knowledge as possible. As did those before you.”

While those words may have been spoken by a mystical entity, they represented a real-world concern in the face of disaster. The World Tree’s utterance would have been directed to the people of the late period ancient civilization, so “As did those before you” could have been referring to an earlier society. This mythic account was laced with enough historical elements to most likely not be pure fantasy.

Approximately one month later, Lady Alicia visited the Sacula residence in her princess attire. On the surface, it just looked like Her Highness was attending a private dinner to show her appreciation for Count Sacula’s support. However, since she did not do the same for our rival Marquis Datar, it made it pretty clear whom she favored. In essence, that was the purpose of the dinner. Not private at all.

“Say what you like about it, but I find dinner at this residence to be just so relaxing. Back at the royal palace, it just feels like another chore. In that regard, my visits to the Sacula residence always feel like a day off.” Lady Alicia smiled after taking a bite of the demi-glace Hamburg steak. “Sooo good! I can’t believe I’m eating a hot meal prepared by Ash himself!”

At the royal palace, she could only eat her food after someone had tasted it for poison. As a result, it had always cooled down by the time she had got it, no matter how hot they were served. Extreme caution was warranted, especially since a certain marquis had assassinated members of the royal family. Lady

Alicia grumbled that she understood the reasoning, but cold food just did not taste good. She then proceeded to help herself to another Hamburg steak.

“You’ve got it rough, Alicia. I probably wouldn’t even last three days in your place,” Maika commented sullenly from beside Her Highness. She took another Hamburg steak. Life at the royal palace was not completely out of the question for her, since she had royal blood running through her veins as Count Sacula’s granddaughter, but my fiancée did not seem to realize this.

“I didn’t last longer than three days either. But I had no choice but to resign myself, and eventually I got somewhat used to it. If only I could help in the kitchen at least...” It would probably have boosted her popularity if she helped in the kitchen, but unfortunately it went against the palace rules.

On the other hand, in Sacula, cooking skills were a surefire way to popularity. Maika occasionally helped out Chef Yacoo in the residence kitchen, and that always earned her the admiration of the populace, who said she lived up to her grandfather’s reputation. According to Maika, she helped out because she wanted to hone her skills so she could fulfill any of my food requests. How lucky I was.

“I miss Chef Yacoo’s cooking. The food in Sacula was always so good.” Lady Alicia let out a nostalgic sigh, then proceeded to stuff her cheeks with a second helping of Hamburg steak. She blissfully chewed away. The contrast between her lively appetite and elegant mannerisms was adorable.

“It somehow sounds like you’re talking about your hometown,” Maika pondered with a smile.

“You think so?” Lady Alicia paused to think for a moment, then smiled. “You’re probably right. Sacula does feel like my hometown. I made so many good memories, found purpose, and formed special friendships.” She shot a longing glance toward me.

“If you ever want to come back, just say so and I will come pick you up,” I replied without hesitation. I was not joking or merely trying to console her. If necessary, I would get rid of any obstacles in my way.

“Can you still say that now that you’re engaged?” Lady Alicia averted her eyes.

“That plan may have some snags, but I refuse to break my promise.” I still remembered our exchange back at the dormitory. It may have only been a verbal agreement, but I still stood by it. I had promised that I would accept her help whenever she offered it. And I would not back out for whatever reason. “Do you mind, Maika?”

“I’ve got mixed feelings,” Maika voiced her concerns with a gentle smile on her reddened face. “But that’s also one of the qualities I love about you. And you said it to Alicia. I can’t get mad at her. In fact, I insist you invite her to Sacula. I think I’m going to fall for Ash all over again.” She mostly directed her reply to Lady Alicia. “I wish Ash would abduct me,” Maika added in a low voice. *Sorry, but thanks for doing the abducting instead. Does becoming a tournament prize count as an abduction?*

Lady Alicia fidgeted bashfully for a while before looking back up with a smile brighter than the sun. “Sacula is my hometown. I will definitely return someday. Just wait a little longer,” she proclaimed while staring at me.

“Don’t make us wait too long!” For some reason, it was Maika that replied.

Once we had finished eating, the master of the residence, His Excellency Count Sacula, broached one of the reasons for today’s gathering. “Now then, let’s move onto the results of Ash’s maneuvering!” He also briefly commented on the earlier youthful, bittersweet exchange. “As count, I might object to some of the things that were just said, but I don’t understand anything about solidarity between women, so I’ll stay out of it.” The count implied that his authority did not necessarily extend to the women of this house. This was the Sacula family style. “Since Ash has become a part of our family, the priests have started making courtesy calls with me. They’re all very friendly, but are they just paying lip service? Or can I take them at face value?”

“Your Excellency, you do know that people sometimes adopt a neutral position?”

“I don’t believe in neutrality.” I slightly envied his refreshing opinion. Very straightforward. I liked that about Count Gentoh. I forced a smile and passed the baton to Lady Alicia, who seemed to know more about their true motives.

“This probably doesn’t apply to everyone, but I do think that those who come to greet you are friendly toward the House of Sacula. The majority of priests are fans of the phoenix.” She turned to look at me. “Why do you look so surprised, Ash?”

“I always run into a lot of resistance during our discussion rounds.”

“But you also fill the visitor seats.” Each time I had shown up at the assembly, the audience had increased until eventually all the seats had become perpetually occupied. “Most of the audience supports the head priest. You must have noticed there were a lot of younger faces. As I said before, the current head priest is a reformist and the young clergy is very much behind him. Not least because he has been actively appointing young people like them.”

It seemed that those opposed to my arguments during the discussions were the same higher-ups who suppressed the younger generation. Naturally, a lot of the young priests and trainees flocked to the spectacle of a young controversialist trifling with the same evil high priests who found fault in everything they did. It was a great form of stress relief.

“The head priest said he was extremely grateful. Ash not only motivates the youth, but he also helps keep the conservatives quiet,” Lady Alicia continued.

“I knew that Father Birkan was on our side, but not that it extended to the majority of the audience.” No wonder they had laughed, clapped, and cheered at the right times. Having my arguments underscored with sound effects from the audience gave them more weight and dampened the efficacy of my opponents’ rebuttals.

“Based on all the support we’re getting from the head priest, I think it’s safe to say that we already have the Church on our side,” Lady Alicia concluded. The Church was a large organization, so naturally there were still some dissenters, but one did not just become head priest without majority support. The title alone was proof of popularity and political strength. “But as expected, he took quite a liking to you Ash, didn’t he? After every session, he has invited you for a personal talk.”

“He is a very friendly man, and we have lively conversations.” Plus, he loved tomato dishes. Whenever I brought him tomato sauce as a present, he

welcomed me with wide open arms. *I'm starting to think maybe he keeps inviting me just for the tomato sauce.*

"Given the special treatment, rumor has it that the head priest has become captivated by Sir Fenix."

"He is certainly captivated by tomatoes."

"Tomatoes?" Lady Alicia looked puzzled. But since it was of no importance, I just signaled her to forget about it. Besides, there was no need to tarnish the reputation of our newfound ally. "I'm not sure what you mean, but anyway, when I met him a while ago, he had high praises for Ash and promised me his help. With this, we should be able to beat Marquis Datara."

"So it's finally time to settle things," Maika said and licked her lips, as if she was preparing to bite into her prey's windpipe.

"Yeah. I'm a little sad for it to end because that means Ash and Maika will go back to Sacula..." Lady Alicia sighed with a sad face, then squinted and murmured, "but that's no reason to spare the guy who tried to kill Ash."

"You tell them, Alicia!"

"Leave it to me, Maika!"

They squeezed each other's hands tightly and talked themselves into a frenzy. There seemed to be a fire burning inside of them, but strangely enough, they were giving off very chilling vibes. I agreed with Count Gentoh on this matter; understanding the solidarity between women was more difficult than building a bomb. Thus I refrained from commenting.

"Now we just need to decide how to draw out Marquis Datara," I said. To me, that seemed more difficult than gaining the Church's support.

Marquis Datara was extremely savvy when it came to politics. Otherwise, he would not be able to get away with his coercive methods, including using his money to employ thugs and assassins. And he was not stupid enough to risk a head-on collision with Sacula now that his position was weakened. Therefore, a civilized solution like a trial was out of the question.

Generally, any physical conflict between two powerful leaders rarely ended

with a quick, clean victory. By the time a winner emerged, the situation had deteriorated into a lot of senseless violence. War led to a leader's decapitation and a siege of the enemy capital. A complete waste of resources. Although thanks to the widespread dueling culture where you could put your life on the line, severing a leader's head did not always necessitate war. Unfortunately, looking at the Datara way of doing things, I suspected the marquis was not very keen to shed blood and sweat at a sports event.

So if neither war nor a trial were an option, all that was left was the social arena. I had already experienced the nobles' art of social warfare last time I had come to the royal capital, when everyone had scrambled for Lady Alicia's attention at Marquis Datara's party.

At the event, people gathered around the strongest person. Those groupings subsequently translated into alliances outside the venue. It was a way to gauge the enemy's strength in the case of an all-out battle. *It had the same energy as military exercises conducted at country borders. "This is what'll happen if you mess with us."*

At the previous party, the Frontier Alliance displayed its power by gaining the attention of Lady Alicia, the most influential guest, signaling to Marquis Datara that he would no longer be able to do as he pleased. Halfway through, I had also shown my actual strength by beating up a little punk going by the name of "Viscount Yanga," but both methods were equally effective.

Since then, Lady Alicia had been able to operate quite freely. She had consolidated her power as princess by strengthening her bond with the Church and supporting the Frontier Alliance. And even if the Datara faction still tried to interfere, those who had attended the party had become more hesitant to follow the marquis's orders for fear of the Frontier Alliance's retribution and therefore left the princess alone.

In summary, the parties were akin to wars without gunfire. And like any war, there was always the possibility to just not show up on the battlefield. That was the option that Marquis Datara had chosen. *Lots of people didn't mind losing in sports, but I doubt anyone would've shown up to a fight with their money and life on the line where the odds were stacked against them. Myself included.*

When faced with a fleeing enemy, one did not have to chase after them. You could increase your own army's strength, spread out, and slowly wear your enemy out. However, that was not at all Sacula's style.

"He's an eyesore. Like a disgusting bug. Time to squish him," a certain region leader said.

"Like a fly buzzing in your ear. We need to swat him now," his granddaughter added.

Their reaction was not entirely without reason. Marquis Datara loved dodgy dealings, so it was not inconceivable that he would send in some spies while running away. In other words, we should crush him before he became a nuisance again. The question was how to drag the Marquis Datara out from his shell.

"Does anyone have a plan?" I asked.

"I might be able to help," Lady Alicia, who had just deepened her friendship with Maika, declared with a smile. "I am still a royal. I can throw a dinner party or two."

"That sounds great." The fact that this was not possible during my last visit showed how tight Marquis Datara's grip had been. It was poetic justice that he would have to deal with our counteroffensive right as his grip had loosened.

"Now we just have to decide whom to invite..." Lady Alicia placed her fingers to her chin and tilted her head as she pondered. "If I flaunt Ash's presence, I could call the head priest. That would probably yield the best results."

"Oh yeah, that should settle the problem in one go," Count Gentoh agreed with a satisfied look on his face.

I wondered what Her Highness had meant by "best results." She looked a bit scary when saying that.

Seventeen years ago, I had been born the son of a farmer in a remote village out in the middle of nowhere. I had never thought that one day I would be going to a ball at the royal palace. This was beyond a doubt the pinnacle of nobility in this world.

Since it was a ball, anyone with a partner could of course bring them along. Next to me walked Maika in a mermaid dress, resembling a qipao with a high slit. She looked beautiful; the dress accentuated her toned bodyline, which she had acquired from her daily training.

“Hm, is this it? The royal hall?” Maika voiced her indifference at the luxurious venue as we walked through it with our arms entwined. The designers and builders would have been crushed hearing her blunt opinion. Most likely, she was not paying much attention to the sumptuous decorations as she was too bothered by the stone floor. If people from the frontier regions had one thing in common, it was the frugal urge to use stone only for the city wall. Defense before decoration—that was our motto.

“Not much rare stuff here.” Maika ignored the opulence and intricate workmanship; she judged the venue by its use of new materials and technologies. I felt the same. They were spending a lot of money, and in terms of craftsmanship it may have been top class, but it was a combination of outdated techniques. No sign of scientific progress. The exact opposite of our current home, the exchange student residence. No wonder Maika was disappointed.

After pouting for a while, Maika smiled at me. “But I’m looking forward to dancing with you at the royal palace. That should be memorable.”

“Yes, that will make for a great story to tell.” Maika squeezed my entwined arm, and I slightly leaned on her. Leaning on Maika was like leaning on an immovable large tree. My fiancée had a strong trunk.

“This is special...it feels like I’m spoiling you right now.”

“Oh, you noticed,” I joked, and a sheepish smile came over her face.

As we were killing time, more and more people of higher rank entered the hall. The admission process followed a certain set of social etiquette. People came in order of their ranks, the lowest first. The practice had originally started out of consideration to avoid making your superiors wait, but now it had become compulsory.

Our region’s exalted count had called it a hassle. As expected from the type of person who showed up unannounced at a hot spring just because he wanted to

see your face. He would hate a pointless custom like this.

That same count entered the hall fairly early. Even though he was often treated like a provincial hick, his rank was still at the same level as a duke, only one or two levels below the king. In other words, he was extraordinarily early. Personally, I thought he had shown a lot of restraint by not coming in together with Maika and me already. *I guess I agree with the count on this one.*

Here and there, some central nobles sneered at Count Sacula's unusually early entrance. But their laughter soon stopped when they noticed who was accompanying him.

"Your Eminence, my granddaughter and her fiancé are over there."

"Oh, I see them. Your Excellency, may I greet them?"

"Of course, but you don't need my permission. Those two can handle themselves."

The two extraordinarily powerful men—one with a rank equal to the king and the other with a rank just below—joked with each other as they approached us. In terms of etiquette, they were way too early. Currently, only low-rank followers from each faction and a few representatives of region leaders had arrived, but nobody brave or educated enough to talk with someone like the head priest. Some onlooker's flustered expressions suggested that they wanted to stop him, but nobody did anything.

"Good evening, Maika, Ash." We had gotten close enough that he had started calling me by my first name rather than my title. The secret to our friendship was tomatoes. Proving once again that the way to anyone's heart was through their stomach. As a token of our friendship, he had granted me access to all of the Church's archives, albeit only in his presence.

"I am glad you could make it, Father Birkan," I replied.

"Good evening, Father Birkan," Maika greeted back.

"You are quite early," I commented with a wry smile.

"When I heard that you and the headhunting princess would attend the party, I just got too excited. How embarrassing for someone my age," the head priest

explained with a grin that did not imply any embarrassment at all.

“I’m honored to hear you say that. If you don’t mind, may I join you and Ash next time you meet?”

“Of course. Ash told me that you are very talented and educated. As the leader of the clergy, I would be delighted to talk to such a wise woman as you. I am looking forward to it.”

With the head priest’s arrival, we had suddenly become the center of attention. We continued talking for a while, calling attention to our friendship, which made the rival faction’s faces turn pale. *That’s right. The head priest is our ally.* One of the marquis’s underling nobles ignored all etiquette and hurried toward the exit, most likely to report back to his boss.

A little later, Marquis Datara showed up. Next to Her Highness Princess Alicia. On the surface, they appeared friendly with each other, but that surface was thinner than cling film. As soon as they had entered the hall, Marquis Datara tried to congregate with his faction, but Lady Alicia intercepted him and pointed in the direction of the head priest.

I managed to overhear their conversation.

“Oh, if that isn’t Father Birkan. We should go say hello, Marquis Datara.”

“Right. I’d love to, but someone else called for me...”

“Oh, Sir Fenix is with him too! Maybe you can ask him for some medical advice? I heard you haven’t been too well lately. And Sir Fenix’s extensive medical knowledge is famous even here in the capital.”

Lady Alicia forcefully dragged the fleeing target toward us with her words, as if she had an iron grip on the nape of his neck.

“Good evening, Father Birkan, Count Sacula, Maika...and the phoenix,” Lady Alicia greeted us. She looked relieved that she had successfully completed her mission. As did we four.

Conversely, Marquis Datara’s smile seemed a little stiff. I was a little worried seeing his face turn pale following our opening move. At this rate, he might suffer a heart attack during the main phase.

“Phoenix, I am sorry to bother you, but would you mind giving Marquis Datara some advice,” Lady Alicia continued.

“Gladly, if I can be of any help to His Excellency.”

“Thank you.” She smiled like a cat ready to pounce on her prey.

Likewise, Maika glared at him with the glistening eyes of a bird of prey. If looks could kill, the marquis would have already died several times over.

“Lately, Marquis Datara has been unwell. He stopped hosting his regular dinner parties and I haven’t seen him attend any other banquets in a while either. It seems that he even considered missing today’s gathering, and just earlier he almost left because he suddenly felt ill.” Apparently Lady Alicia had caught him right at the exit and brought him back inside. Marquis Datara must not have known that you could not escape the princess.



“I see. Hm. Considering His Excellency’s advanced age, I fear it may be partially due to that...”

“You don’t have to worry too much, Sir Fenix. My doctor is taking good care of me.”

“Oh, do you have a personal physician? I guess that would be normal for a man of your stature,” I replied to the marquis, who nodded in agreement. But I had no intention of letting him off the hook. “In that case, your ailment may be of a psychogenic origin. You might be suffering from too much stress.”

“Stress, you say...” Marquis Datara sounded slightly bitter.

Good. I’ve experienced my fair share of stress because of you, so it’s your turn now.

“I imagine as a marquis, you have to worry about a lot of things. The region’s economy, relations with both your neighbors and more distant places... Your Excellency must constantly be on alert and indeed take appropriate measures.”

“Well, yes, that is my duty.” *I know that you’ve recently had a lot of trouble with a certain distant region.*

“It seems that all that work has affected your health. Maybe you should consider taking some time off if you often feel unwell.”

“You shouldn’t speak like that to a region’s leader.” Marquis Datara’s voice sounded defiant. He was ready to fight. “Since you are still young, you may not realize it, but your words could be considered interference in the domestic affairs of my region.”

“You do not need to explain any further. I know very well what you are talking about. Only recently, we had to deal with foreign interference into our region’s affairs,” I countered. “Maybe it has already reached Your Excellency’s ears, but there was an armed uprising in Sacula.”

“Yes, I heard about that. Rumor has it that it was a domestic insurrection.”

“The majority of the ringleaders were indeed from Sacula, so I cannot say that it was not a domestic conflict at all.” Those rumors he mentioned were most likely the reports from his spies. However, they did not know everything. So I

very kindly shared more information. “But we also caught some perpetrators from outside the region. We captured approximately twenty spies. Alive.”

We had not killed our prisoners. Marquis Datara probably had not known this. Who would have told him? Considering we had caught most of his spies, Marquis Datara’s information either stemmed from those who had observed the uprising from afar or left the city before any conflict had broken out. Therefore they could not have known that we had captured twenty spies, or in other words, twenty new sources of information. *Wasn’t it nice of me to tell Marquis Datara that we knew more about his activities than suspected?*

“After some investigation, we found out that an outsider instigated the perpetrators from Sacula... Would you not consider that to be foreign interference?” I asked the marquis.

“Could be, but I don’t know any details.” *Don’t play dumb. You know better than anyone.*

“I imagine you are wondering where the spies were from?”

“Indeed.” He did not sound too concerned. But since he had affirmed my question, I decided to give him the answer.

“Unfortunately, we did not unravel that mystery. Their speech and dress were very much attuned to Sacula customs.”

“Then it will be difficult to find out who sent them.” Marquis Datara seemed satisfied.

“There is no doubt they were extremely skilled spies. But I would love to pick your brain on something,” I said, pressing forward with a smile. “Despite their skill, the spies still occasionally slipped back into old familiar customs. In their exhaustion, they spoke in their local accent, saying they were ‘scar’d.’ They also talked about their favorite local pickled vegetables, and their daggers were ornamented with fragrant wood charms. It should be possible to pinpoint their origin from those features. Do you maybe have an idea?” None of those things were customary in the frontier regions, so it must have been from a central one.

Marquis Datara was at a loss for words. What a sight from a veteran socialite

like him. Father Birkan came to his rescue. “I have heard about those customs before. They’re from the west. Including the Datara region, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Yes, that is correct.” Marquis Datara was unable to deny the facts, so he just briefly acknowledged it.

“So I was right. It must have been a central noble.”

“Why did you assume that it was a central noble?” Father Birkan asked as a third-party observer (ally) in place of Marquis Datara, whose mouth had apparently been sewn shut.

“Demons are the frontier regions’ archenemy. They do not seek out human conflict on top of that.”

“Makes sense. And you must know best as a renowned Sacula knight, but...”

“Yes?”

“I am not sure how to say this, but it seems like a certain frontier leader likes to pick fights with other regions.” Father Birkan tried to sound neutral, but the tomato fan was ultimately on my side.

“I know who you are talking about. But that person resides in the capital, so he is far removed from the realities of his region.”

“Now that you mention it, I do see him here in the capital all year around. What do you think, Marquis Datara?” *I’m sure you’ve guessed that we’re talking about your subordinate Viscount Yanga by now.*

Both Father Birkan and I forced a smile in an attempt to get a reply out of him, but the marquis remained tight-lipped. He definitely knew whom we meant. Unfortunately, not everyone could get away with remaining silent after they had been caught red-handed. For example, I would have immediately forgiven Maika or Lady Alicia because such a reaction would have been adorable coming from them. Marquis Datara, however, did not look adorable at all, so he was guilty as charged.

“Anyway, I imagine running your region leaves a mark on both your mind and body.” This had nothing to do with what I was just saying, but it did not matter.

The point of the conversation so far was to let Marquis Datara know that we had seen through his schemes and ask whether he had any objections. Since he had remained silent, he apparently did not have any. In high society, this was an admission of guilt—or defeat at the very least. “I really do not want to interfere in Datara’s domestic affairs, but hearing about Your Excellency’s health condition, it does seem like a break would be appropriate.” A very long break, preferably.

Her Highness Lady Alicia showed an affectionate smile—like she had just dropped an ant into an antlion pit—as she warned the marquis who had looked after her since her childhood. “Please don’t overexert yourself, Marquis Datara. I’ve heard that you have been training your successor. There should be no problem if they took over for a while, right?”

Before the marquis launched into another bout of sophism, Lady Alicia waved across the room and ran off in that direction. Moments later, she returned together with His Majesty the King.

“Your Majesty, please tell Marquis Datara that he needs to rest. Recently, he has been falling ill a lot.”

None of the interactions at these high society events were random. The groundwork had already been laid in advance. Nonetheless, His Majesty still waited to see if Marquis Datara would say anything. As a way to confirm the Sacula faction’s superiority.

“Datara, at your age you should let your successor do some of your work from time to time. Otherwise, he won’t have any experience when taking over.” His Majesty essentially told him to just quietly withdraw from the public eye. Marquis Datara’s mouth slightly twitched, but he nodded in agreement. He was bad at disguising his emotions. Goddess Yuika would have nodded without any change in expression.

“I expected a duel. I even chose a dress that was easy to move in.” Maika clicked her tongue. The goddess’s daughter had no intention of hiding her emotions at all. Apparently, she had hoped to legally dispose of the rival nobleman. Since she had made no effort to lower her voice, those around us had overheard her. With a stiff expression, they passed it off as an unusual joke.

Of course, it was a threat. Maika tried to suppress any complaint by showing her willingness to go at it any time. But she was not serious about it—even if she had deposited three of her favorite swords at the reception and had chosen her dress as if it were armor. It was merely posturing. And preparation so she could respond in an emergency.

If my fiancée had decided to get serious, there would have been rumors of an elusive, bloodthirsty killer roaming the streets of the capital by now. But my fiancée was kind. The daughter of a goddess. An angel.

Afterward, I just enjoyed myself for the rest of the party. That was a first here in the capital. I danced with Maika and even Lady Alicia for one song. However, I was not allowed to choose any other dance partners.

His Majesty the King thanked me in a very roundabout way for taking care of Lady Alicia when she had been Arthur. While I was honored by his gratitude, I told him that I considered Lord Arthur to be a good friend, so it was only natural that we helped each other out. In response, the king showed a paternal smile and patted my shoulders.

Following our exchange, His Majesty left with Count Gentoh; the two seemed to be on good terms. I also met the firstborn prince, Lady Alicia's older brother, for the first time. His pretty face hinted at his blood relationship with Lady Alicia, but his look was that of a person who coldly judged the guests by their faction and abilities. He was probably too immersed in the royal capital's way of life. He gave off a very different impression than Lady Alicia, who was brimming with curiosity and reasoning power. It seemed like he had a good grasp of the present but did not see anything further ahead.

Lady Alicia was definitely better company. She had a promising future. My like-minded fiancée agreed with my assessment. All the while, Lady Alicia's face was turning red with embarrassment as she stood next to us listening.

After the party, Marquis Datarā announced that he would be returning to his region to take care of his health. Mission accomplished. However, none of us thought that he would just quietly back down.

"That was not the look of a man who has given up," I commented.

“He’ll keep getting in our way until we sever his head,” Maika interjected.

“I’m sure he’s already devised a new plan,” Lady Alicia ruminated.

Everyone agreed. Before we were scheduled to leave the royal capital, we had held one last meeting.

“However, there is no doubt that he has lost power,” Lady Alicia declared confidently. “In particular, here in the center, he won’t be able to move as openly anymore. He’s made an enemy of the royal family. At the very least, as long as Sacula’s influence doesn’t wane, he won’t do anything here in the capital.”

“Which means that he will target the frontier regions again...” I concluded.

Viscount Yanga was Marquis Datara’s hands and feet. But what was an untrained lapdog who struggled to assert dominance even on the marquis’s own turf going to do in a distant region? I could only really think of one viable option.

“It looks like the remodeled fort we built in preparation of an attack from the Yanga region will come in handy after all. Although I would prefer if it did not.” I let out a sigh, which was reciprocated by Count Gentoh, albeit with a different connotation.

“I wish I could see our state-of-the-art fort before the military uses it,” he lamented.

“Given the state of things, I am afraid Your Excellency will need to take care of business in the capital.”

“Hm... Can’t Itsuki do that instead?” *No way. Please forget about it.* For a start, we had not built the fort for practical use. Yes, we had taken into consideration the military threat from both the Yanga region and the Roaring Dragon Mountains, given their locations. However, that was merely a pretext to obtain funds and turn it into a test site for our newest inventions. As evidenced by the fact that it was only a tenth of the ideal size. We compromised with the scale on the basis that the opponent could not match our gunpowder weapons. Then we started construction as fast as possible.

That project provided a chance for Sacula’s civil engineers to procure the

know-how necessary for concrete and brick construction. If possible, I would have liked to continue peacefully using the fort as both a training site and an exhibition hall for our newest techniques and inventions.

“I did not intend for it to become a military museum...” But if we engaged in a fight under the current conditions, it was bound to turn into such a facility. While that was not necessarily bad, it unfortunately undercut the achievements of the scientists and engineers if the installation became a military memorial hall rather than a technological one. I may have been a knight, but first and foremost, I was a peace-loving scholar!

“As expected, Ash doesn’t worry about losing at all,” Count Gentoh said.

“Of course, he doesn’t! Ash is the invincible and undefeated phoenix!” Maika chimed in.

“Ash is still as reliable as ever,” Lady Alicia commented.

As always, it was difficult to make them see my point of view. Nobody understands you better than yourself.

Unfortunately, our trusty, sworn ally the House of Sukuna confirmed my suspicions a while later.

“They have been stockpiling provisions, procuring weapons and armor, summoning reserve troops... I’m afraid all our information points toward the Yanga region preparing for war.” Lady Seire concluded her analysis with a genuinely regretful expression on her face.

Among all of our predictions, this was the worst-case scenario. Lord Itsuki reluctantly asked for confirmation. “Just to be sure, there are no signs of demon or bandit attacks in the Yanga region?”

“Officially, the House of Yanga says they are preparing for bandits and demons, but so far, we haven’t been able to verify their claims. We are, however, observing a constant flow of peddlers supplying munitions and refugees who report fleeing emergency conscription.” *Yep, sounds like a poor excuse. Some leaders don’t even bother coming up with good lies.*

The attendees of the leaders’ meeting were all visibly exasperated at the

prospect of war. Despite, or maybe because of its reputation as a military powerhouse, Sacula was not eager to engage in conflict. We knew all too well what a waste of resources it was.

“We managed to shut up Marquis Datara in the capital. So we only need to shut up Viscount Yanga, and it’ll be all quiet both here and there,” Lord Itsuki, the highest ranking attendee, squeezed out some praise.

“At least for the next ten years,” Lady Seire commented. According to the intelligence department’s prognostics, the Datara faction could regain its influence in ten years given an extraordinary amount of luck and tenacity. However, if they only mustered a regular amount of luck and tenacity, they would not recover until his grandchildren’s generation. And seeing how they were using the last of their declining fortune to finance a Sacula harassment campaign, I was fairly confident the latter would be the case.

“As much as we’d like to, we won’t be able to avoid this conflict. Let’s pull ourselves together and come up with a counterplan. Sir George, what have you got?” Lord Itsuki clapped his hands and asked the military delegate for his opinion.

“Let me present our strategic proposal. Since tensions with the Yanga region have been on the rise for a while now, we have incorporated appropriate defensive measures into Fort Phoenix. Using that as our base—”

“Huh? What?” The words slipped out of my mouth. It was an unfamiliar name.

Sir George stopped mid-explanation and looked at me. “Does something bother you, Sir Fenix?”

“No, I think I just misheard. Sorry for the interruption. Please continue.”

“Okay... We probably won’t be able to complete the fort before Yanga’s attack, but even in its unfinished state, it should provide more than enough protection. Since there are no similarly effective facilities or terrain nearby, Fort Phoenix provides the best solution for—”

“Huh?” It slipped out of my mouth again. So I had *not* misheard.

Sir George stopped mid-explanation and looked at me again. “Does

something bother you, Sir Fenix?”

“In fact, it does! Why are you calling it Fort Phoenix? I am in charge of that project, and I have never heard that name!” The official name was “Northern Roaring Dragon Mountains and Anti-Yanga Defense Fort,” but it was most commonly referred to as “Fort Test Site” or “Fort Radial Engine”. Where did he get “Fort Phoenix” from? While I could only see ill will attached to that term, Sir George appeared extremely calm.

“Good question, Sir Fenix. Lord Itsuki proposed it before the meeting, because if we’re going to use it in battle, we’ll need something catchy.”

“Why did you not inform me, as the project supervisor? And why phoenix? That does not sound like a fort name at all!”

“The name bodes well and tells you who built it. Everyone was in favor; there were no votes against it.”

“I am against it!”

“I’m afraid the final decision was taken right before this meeting.” *Why did you hold the vote in the absence of the project supervisor?!*

“Is that why everyone was here so early?”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Even Maika. No wonder she had left earlier than I did. *I wish she’d told me about their scheme...* But Maika’s smile looked brighter than ever, without a single hint of ill will. Unable to resist my fiancée’s charm, I gave up, held my head in my hands, and face-planted into the desk.

“It looks like Sir Fenix doesn’t have any further questions, so I will continue with my explanation.” *Just do as you like.* “Furthermore, Fort Phoenix can easily accommodate our new weapons.”

Upon hearing the exciting term “new weapons,” Lady Seire sat up attentively. As anything relating to our new arsenal was treated as confidential, so as an outsider, Lady Seire had not been kept up-to-date. That said, the troops had already been practicing shooting the weapons out in the open, so the secret was not that well-kept. Nonetheless, since nobody had explained them to her, Lady Seire probably did not know any details.

“Since the operation will be performed by a trained squad, I propose we entrust the command to an equally suited person. I suggest Sir Fenix, the supervisor of the fort project and the original proponent of the new weapons program. You can consider my word the consensus of the entire army,” Sir George concluded with a bow toward Lord Itsuki, who had the final say, before sitting down again.

Lord Itsuki surveyed the faces in the room. “Are there any questions regarding the army’s proposed strategy plan?”

Since all the attendees had been informed of the plan in advance, nobody spoke up. I had also planned to stay silent. But they had to give the fort a name associated with me! Phoenix! What a bad joke...

“Well then, I will leave Sir Fenix in command. I’m counting on you, Ash!” Lord Itsuki decided with a mischievous smile. With my face still planted on the table, I merely raised my hand in response.

After deciding on a basic plan of action, Sacula gradually started preparing. This was no doubt the calm before the storm. But one more thing needed to be done before a war could break out. We had to try diplomatic persuasion, aka: “please do not do anything stupid,” and diplomatic threats, aka: “stop, or we will punch you until you cry.” After all, we were not barbarians; we could not start a fight without a proper greeting. Unlike our savage enemy who pretended to be civilized, I was a full-fledged civilized person. We may have already made a lot of preparations and spent a lot of money in anticipation of war, but in all seriousness, there would be no better outcome than avoiding it. However, I did not even think for a second that it could be avoided. After all, we were dealing with a brute.

Maika and I were sent as representatives of the civilized people to meet the savage at his den. Of course, we were not very enthusiastic about the mission. As we entered the Yanga region with ten knights at our side, we exchanged smiles in anticipation of the likely unpleasant conversation. As diplomats, Maika and I may have been assigned guards, but since we were also capable of fighting ourselves, we could quickly transform into a reconnaissance squad.

The regional capital's streets were a testament to Yanga's slumping economy. After arriving in the city, we were shown to the gorgeous yet poorly maintained and deserted administrative halls. Viscount Yanga ushered Maika and I into the parlor room. It seemed he had learned some civilized manners from his time at Marquis Datara's place.

As our regions were at the cusp of war, tensions were high, and we both kept our armed guards with us. Maika and I, however, laid down our arms in our function as diplomats. We had told our guards to keep a spare sword ready to hand to us in the case of an emergency.

"I am honored to see Your Excellency Viscount Yanga. It has been a while since we last met."

Sitting reclined in the seat of honor, the lord of these halls appeared big. Not so much in terms of attitude, but physical appearance. Unfortunately, it did not look like we would hear an inspirational story about how losing a duel to me inspired him to get back to training.

"You're still a knight? Lucky brat."

"Defeating another region's leader earned me some reputation. I very much appreciate the favor." Seeing that the viscount had kicked off our reunion with a verbal blow, I countered with a verbal foot swipe. He did not seem to be interested in holding serious diplomatic talks. As expected from a savage.

The savage's attempt at cross-cultural communication lit up Maika's face with a smile. "That is quite the original greeting, Your Excellency. I guess a sudden transition of power also brings about unusual etiquette." Translated, her words meant something like, *Where are your manners, you pig who stole the title of viscount?*

A lot had happened between Viscount Yanga and us, and since he had decided to pick a fight with me right from the start, Maika had seemingly resolved herself to engage him with all her strength.

"I don't need to show respect toward a peasant brat and the lass who wants to take him as a groom!"

"What a novel opinion, Your Excellency. May I relay it to the exalted head

priest and Her Highness the Princess next time I meet them?” Maika covered her mouth and let out a refined chuckle. By letting the viscount know that the “brat” and “lass” were on friendly terms with the royal capital’s bigwigs, she was flaunting our diplomatic power. That undoubtedly frustrated Viscount Yanga, who had not even been able to attend the party where we had cornered Marquis Datara.

“You brat! Don’t think I’ll toady up to you just because you use someone else’s authority as a shield!”

“Oh, you misapprehend. I don’t need a shield to talk to Your Excellency. Not even a sword like a jewel for that matter.” I agreed with her assessment: there was no need to be afraid of an opponent whom you could kill with your bare hands. Even a civilized person gains a sense of security from physical superiority. *But the term “sword like a jewel” brings back some memories.* Maika’s disparaging remarks about his tampered sword made Viscount Yanga blush from embarrassment.

“How about we move on from the small talk?” There was no point listening to much more of Viscount Yanga’s childish remarks. He looked extremely dissatisfied, even though at this rate, he would most likely be the one to keep losing face. He was even more hopeless at verbal arguments than sword duels.

“Your Excellency, please allow me to speak as a representative of the Sacula region. We can no longer turn a blind eye to the Yanga region’s repeated illegal activities. We demand you stop your torts at once and issue a public apology,” I declared.

“How insolent! If anyone needs to apologize, it is your side! I know that you kidnapped our region’s innocent citizens!” Apparently, that was how Viscount Yanga saw the refugees who had risked their lives leaving their hometowns behind and fleeing to a neighboring region where they did not have any means of support.

I let out a sigh and confirmed his intentions with simple and not very formal words. “Are you sure this is the way you want to go about it? There is no turning back if you keep pushing forward. I am sure you are already aware of this, but a conflict between our regions could attract flocks of demons.” Why

did I have to admonish a senior like him? Because I was the civilized one? At this point, there was no doubt that he was a savage.

Viscount Yanga seemed to take my concerns as a sign of weakness. He threw out his chest, and in the process, pushed forward his chubby belly. “Ha! Neither I nor my troops fear the demons! Consider this your last chance too!”

Ah, seems like I didn't get through to him. I silently prayed for the resources and labor that would be wasted during the war. At the same time, Viscount Yanga shot a lecherous glance at Maika.

“If you want to apologize, you'll have to show you mean it. Are you truly a noble, young lady? Are you prepared to offer your body for the sake of your people?” The verbal vomit coming out of the viscount's squirmy mouth made me blow a fuse, and my mild manners were consumed by an explosion of rage.

But I was a civilized person. Unlike a savage, I did not yell or swing my sword just because I was angry. At most, I would casually make some noise to interrupt the speaker. When I lightly slammed my fist on the wooden table in front of me—with the force of about one ten-thousandth of my rage—it shattered with a bang much louder than anticipated.

“Oops, my apologies. I had a little coughing fit.” But what a brittle table. I smashed it into pieces even though I just lightly touched it. “Did you say anything just now?” I asked with a forced smile. *I dare you to repeat it. I'll break your body like this table.*

Viscount Yanga sank into silence with the expression of a strangled chicken. *What's wrong? Just moments ago, you were glibly making nasty remarks.* It looked like I might have created some tension at these important peace talks. However, I could not really say much lest I get accused of meddling in Yanga's domestic affairs, so I glanced at the convoy of Yanga knights.

Your lord doesn't seem to be doing too well. Shouldn't you look after him? I communicated to them via an extremely worried look. But the two guards who saw it fell silent with pale faces, as if the blood had been sucked out of their bodies. *I guess they don't consider this situation any cause for alarm. They must have a lot of faith in their master.*

I fixed my gaze at the man who was so highly trusted by his subordinates. As I

stared coldly, I devised a plan for how to bring him down if he said anything further out of line. I was eager for him to cause as much trouble as possible. Attracted by the loud noise, people had gathered outside the room. Yet I continued staring at him before offering one final chance.

“Apologize.” First and foremost, I wanted him to apologize for his disrespect toward my Maika, but also his harassment of the Sacula region and the fact that he was currently breathing. I demanded an apology for his entire existence. If he was incapable of that, fine. He could have his war. *I’m already looking forward to seeing what face you’ll make.* Imprudently, my lips formed a smile.

“You— Arrg...” Foam spilled out of Viscount Yanga’s saggy mouth. And his eyes turned white.

“Oh, look. The pig turned out to be a frog... I am sorry, I did not mean to insult the viscount. He clearly seems unwell.” It did not look like we could continue our talks. Either way, without a clear result, we would not be able to leave for quite a while. *Tsk, what a pain. Is there no one who can negotiate in his place?*

“Now...leaving the viscount aside, is anyone else in the Yanga region eager to start a war? If not—”

“...” A voice called out to me. Who or what? I had no idea. But something had called me.

My head instinctively turned toward the window from where I had heard it. It seemed to have come from the direction of the large forest in the Roaring Dragon Mountains. The unexplored region seemed quiet and dark, without any movements, but I was certain that some kind of signal had reached me. It came without warning or premonition, but I felt it in my mind. I remembered experiencing the same feeling when I first met the werewolf and when I fought the treants. Their arrivals had been accompanied by this signal too.

“They are coming.”

I could hear the alarm bells ring from afar. They sounded different than usual. It was not just a warning. Their destructive timbre was like the screams of a man who had just seen the end of the world. It gave me a premonition of imminent doom, substantiated by my mysterious sensation. The signal or signals were stronger than ever.

“Maika, everyone else, the negotiations are over. We must go back to the fort as fast as possible.”

“Can’t argue with that. With those bells ringing, it’s clearly not the time to worry about settling things here.” Maika must have felt the weight of the situation herself. She ran outside, disregarding both the negotiations and the chief negotiator who was lying on his back. “Listen up! Sacula knights, gather! Oh, and hand me our weapons please.” She convened the knights who had waited outside the parlor and thanked them as they retrieved our equipment.

The House of Yanga had been plunged into chaos. But then again, it would have been an extraordinary feat to avoid any commotion with their master having turned into a foaming frog. Since I did not hate the Yanga region in its entirety, I gave some advice to its people while Maika was busy gathering our knights and preparing the equipment.

I assume you have heard that war between humans leads to demon attacks? And I am sure you can imagine what it means that alarm bells are ringing from the direction of the Roaring Dragon Mountains. The viscount over there? That’s a pig pretending to be a frog that looks just like him, but he’s probably away frolicking in the royal capital again. Isn’t it quieter without him? Now, if you understand, get moving. Ah, wait a moment. I recommend going to Sacula if you want to flee. That was the gist of the message I gave out to passing servants, civil officers, and military officers.

I ended up mostly speaking to servants, who ran around the place eagerly bowing and informing everyone of the current events. There was not much of a point informing the higher-ranking officials, regardless of whether they were civil or military. They mostly just ignored or hurled abuses at me. *I guess it’s difficult for a pig to train capable personnel.* Not that learning about Yanga’s personnel affairs helped me in any way.

We avoided the west gate from which the bells had sounded and instead headed for the south gate. But it made little difference. Even here, there were terrified screams being drowned out by ferocious roars. Any Sacula warrior would have recognized that demon’s roar in an instant.

“How did they get inside so quickly?” Maika murmured with a scowl.

“The guards probably didn’t do a great job. They were pretty inefficient when we arrived too, and it didn’t look like there were any senior officers stationed at the gates,” said one of our knights with a wry smile.

“How incompetent can you be?” Maika let out a sigh, drew her favorite sword, and started to give out orders. “Keep the fighting to a minimum and focus on self-defense. I feel sorry for the citizens, but it’s too much for us to handle alone. Our mission is to protect Sacula’s citizens, not Yanga’s.” Maika paused. Her orders may have gone against the average person’s conscience, but she would take responsibility. “Desert everyone except your allies and return to Sacula alive. I order you in the name of Amanobe Sacula!”

The knights acknowledged her command in unison. They must have been deeply thankful to serve such a competent—and cute—leader.

At the south gate in front of us, we could see the bulky beasts and the red mess they had left behind while they had chewed their way through the soldiers.

“Come on! It’s not just one or two?” one of the knights cried with an exasperated expression.

“You should know better at your age. Didn’t your parents tell you that fighting attracts demons?” the knight next to him countered with a smile on his lips.

“The older girl next door mediated whenever I fought with my younger brother. You know how I’ve got a thing for pretty older women.”

“So you’re saying that you’ve been ogling this girl since you were a child and ignored all her lectures?” We all let out a hearty laugh and charged the gate blocked by werewolves.

While they may have chewed their way through the soldiers, they had not eaten them. They might bite and rip out human flesh, but they never swallowed it—as proven by the remains of those who had been killed by werewolves. The same applied to treants. It was unclear why they attacked humans in the first place if not for food.

Either way, since the werewolves were not distracted by human flesh, they instantly sensed our approach and assumed battle positions.

“There’s too many! We’ll run through all at once!” Maika decided. As the vanguard of our group, she became their first target. Three brandished their claws. It was a horrifying sight. Their log-sized arms exerted a huge amount of centrifugal force and their vicious paws were equipped with the equivalent of five daggers. When they took a swing at their target, the wind pressure alone was probably enough to tear someone apart.

“Ha!” Maika exclaimed calmly as she nimbly dived under their deadly attacks. She even managed to land a blow to each one of their arms and broke the werewolves’ stances. Thanks to their very predictable large swinging attacks, their deadly herculean strength did not pose any problem to her. Maika’s exquisite performance was of great help to the knights trailing behind her; they passed by the first three demons without having to stop once.

Afterward, we met another wave of two, then three, followed by another three werewolves, but none were cooperating with each other. They all just relied on their innate brute strength and thus were no match for the headhunting princess. Given their high durability and vitality, it may have been a close fight if Maika had actually tried defeating them—especially if they ended up surrounding her—but she merely dodged and passed through them, so she had no problems at all. Meanwhile, I had once nearly died fighting a single werewolf even though I had concentrated on defense.

“Okay, let’s just push through the gate— Waah!” A momentary shadow flew over Maika’s head. She threw herself to the side, managing to dodge the headless soldier’s corpse that had fallen from above the gate. Thanks to her spectacular reflexes, she had been able to evade it in an instant, but it had also slowed her down. With more than ten werewolves chasing after her, their fiendish fangs bared, any loss of time was potentially lethal.

“Everyone, keep running!” I ordered the guards in Maika’s place. They reacted with a mixture of understanding and discontent. They understood my reaction to my fiancée’s peril, but were discontent with abandoning us. In response, I tried to show off a little. “About time for the phoenix to rise again.”

I stepped firmly on the ground and whirled about. I watched Maika’s movements while I rushed back. Apparently, she had decided to remain and fight because the werewolves would most likely catch up with her if she

attempted to run now. It was not a bad decision. As she had proven earlier, Maika was more than capable of sidestepping the werewolves' attacks.

However, when faced with attacks from more than ten beasts, it was difficult to do little more than evade. And given the werewolves' inexhaustible stamina, they would likely come out on top if Maika just kept defending. That was how I had kind of lost against a single specimen.

Maika slipped past the claws of the werewolf at the front of the pack. In passing, her sword sparked. She had cut the nape of the demon's neck. If her opponent were a human, it would have been game over. If it were a bear or a beast of a similar build, the strike would have at least caused a serious injury. Unfortunately, it did not even leave a scratch on the werewolf whose defenses surpassed those of any full-body metal armor.

Maika grimaced. But her swordsmanship did not falter, and she did not slow down. Even after evading attacks from more than ten werewolves and even after they began to encircle her, Maika's movements remained calm.

"I guess werewolves are still wolves... They're great at encircling their prey... What do you think, Ash?"

"They do not coordinate their individual attacks, but their overall movements seem to be organized. They are still a pack after all." Before they had completely surrounded Maika, I positioned myself at her back and told her what I had learned from studying the countless battle records in the city archives.

"Makes sense. But getting surrounded so closely is tough. And my sword can't even scratch them. That took me by surprise."

"Their eyes and mouths are soft. Anything covered in fur is impenetrable. Even if you manage to stab their brain through the eye or mouth, they do not die right away. Be careful."

"Yeah, I remember how badly that werewolf injured you. What a real pain."

And this time, there were more than ten of them! To be frank, we had been driven into a corner. But even they were weak against blinding weapons.

"Maika, on my signal, close your eyes and ears."

“Oh? You’re going for that strategy?” Maika smiled.



Given Viscount Yanga's personality, I had anticipated an attack following his eventual declaration of war. Thus I prepared flash grenades. I had not expected to use them like this, though. Moreover, these were the latest models that used mercury fulminate as a triggering explosive, which meant they did not require manual ignition. I observed the werewolves' movements, then placed my hand on the safety pin and—

Don't move, brother! A voice resonated inside my mind.

It sounded even clearer than the voice I had heard after my fight against the treants. Moments later, dragons appeared. Five of them. Each squashed a werewolf beneath their claws as they landed.

"I do not know how to react to this." This was a first. What a strange phenomenon amidst a state of emergency. As a commonsense person, it exceeded my judgment skills. As if to help my thoughts along, the dragons communicated directly into my mind.

Brother, we apologize for our late arrival.

Brother, we will take over.

Brother, lead the humans away.

Brother, we can no longer stop our brethren.

Brother, our brethren want to be put to sleep by your hand.

Each spoke in a distinct voice, and yet they all merged together until they finally proclaimed all at once:

Brother, protect the humans and fulfill your destiny as the Resurrectioner, He who restores life!

Wait a moment. Why did they spring all this seemingly important and secret information on me during a time of crisis like this? Not knowing what was going on, I grabbed Maika's hand and ran off.

She seemed nervous as we passed by the dragons, but they did not even glance at us. In fact, they were helping us by roaring at the werewolves, slamming their arms against them and sending them flying with their tails.

“Um, Ash? Are dragons known to help humans?”

No way. I looked over my shoulder and recalled the battle—or rather the extinction records. The late-stage ancient civilization was destroyed mostly by dragons; whenever the humans engaged in war, the dragons were the first demons to come flying in.

“Dragons are humanity’s greatest enemy,” I replied. At least according to the records that I had seen. There were no traces of them helping humans, let alone coming to a mutual understanding.

“My destiny as He who restores life...” It was the first time I had heard those words, and yet they sounded so familiar. Like a soothing fire inside my body. As if I had regained something that had been there from the beginning. Something I had known all along. I had just forgotten. But what was that “something?”

That day, the Yanga region’s capital was annihilated by the assault of the dragons and werewolves.

Hermes’s Perspective

Seemed like things had gone wrong. I had expected something to go awry when Ash and Maika had left for Yanga. But even so, things had turned out exceptionally bad.

Just as we had prepared to fight the Yanga military, their region had become overrun with demons. That in itself was not necessarily a problem, but they were most likely also headed our way now.

The situation was giving everyone a huge headache. Starting with the Acting Count Lord Itsuki, all of Sacula’s leading authorities were extremely busy. And while I may not have been a leading authority, I was a member of the laboratory affiliated with the Territory Reform Promotion Office, a department under the count’s direct control. As such, we had an important role to play.

“Reina, I think we need to revise the plan.” I spoke fast as I quickly entered the head office. “The Yanga citizens are currently fleeing the region because of the demon attacks, right? That’ll likely be a big problem.”

“You think so too?” With her elbows on the desk, Reina used one hand to keep her head up and let out a heavy sigh. I knew how she felt. We may not have had much detailed information yet, but busy days were on the horizon.

“I mean, there were more than one hundred demons attacking. At the academy, they told us that’s a very dangerous number, and it seems that they’ve already destroyed several cities in the Yanga region. Not villages, cities.”

Our intelligence department had picked up that information from the first wave of refugees who had left the region before anyone else. In other words, those were not just vague rumors but fairly accurate facts.

“So we should expect the number of Yanga refugees to keep increasing,” I said.

“Yeah, likely.”

“Do you remember when we temporarily accommodated the Ajole villagers in Itsutsu after their village was destroyed by the treants?”

“That was tough.”

“Most of the work was left to the Territory Reform Promotion Office.”

“I remember... I helped too...” As she kept nodding, Reina’s head had seemingly become too heavy to support with just one hand, prompting her to prop it up with both. I felt a bit sorry seeing her like this, but I needed her to look up and deal with the problem at hand before the runaway car crashed before our eyes.

“When Ash comes back, he’ll definitely want us to take care of those refugees.”

“Really? I guess that’s not a surprise. I knew it. I knew it, but...”

We were on the same page. Reina had expected it too. That was just the way Ash was. It had been the same with the Ajole refugees.

“It would be great if we could help. But unfortunately, life’s not that easy, so we can’t do anything.” While most people would have said something along those lines, Ash omitted the “but.” In his case it was, *“It would be great if we could help. So we will strive for greatness.”* He said it with a smile, and we could

not help but love him for it.

And therefore, I smiled too. “That’s why we have to prepare now, Reina. We can’t let our experience with the Ajole refugees go to waste.”

“Okay, okay! I get it! Why are you both like this? Ash is an oddball, but so are you!” Reina’s face turned red, and she clenched her teeth.

“That’s right. We’re both oddballs. But that’s the only way we know to live, so that’s how we get through life.” *Sorry for being a fool who constantly chases after his dreams. And for causing you trouble all the time. I think there’s only one way I can make it up to you...* “I’ll pour you as much alcohol as you want after we’re done, so could you please help? I can’t do it without you.”

“Yes, no doubt! Just like Ash is no good without Maika, you’re no good without me!” Reina howled and pointed at me with an enthused look on her face. “It’s a promise. As much alcohol as I want. No tricks!”

“I promise. No double dealing.” That was a cheap price for Reina’s help.

“All right. In that case, let’s roll up our sleeves and start brainstorming.”

“Hm, the problem will be the number of refugees.”

“Of course. Right now, we can’t really predict the numbers, but I’m guessing it won’t stop at one or two hundred?”

“One or two thousand? Maybe more? A thousand is already difficult enough to imagine...” Our discussion was about to hit a roadblock. Reina sensed the same and shifted the focus.

“First, we should think about what we can do at the lab. Putting aside our duties and the rules for now, what can the lab staff do to help the refugees when they arrive in Sacula? What is our strong area?”

“Well, we’re basically a museum for state-of-the-art technology. How about providing our new carriage models for transportation? Using our construction materials to build residences?”

“Yeah, the carriages could be useful for transport. Not just for the refugees themselves but also food delivery. I don’t know about residences. Can we produce enough bricks and concrete to build that many houses?”

“You’re right. Building houses for hundreds of people might be impossible... But wouldn’t they need stoves to cook their food?”

“Probably. There won’t be enough wood for everyone to make open fires outside.” Reina took out a piece of paper and started writing down our ideas.

“Speaking of stoves and delivery, the refugees will need food. We probably can’t solve that problem by ourselves, but I’m sure they will be happy for anything they can get.”

“We should ask Suiren for advice. The preserved foods we developed should also help a bit.”

“Better than nothing for sure. Also, there will likely be a lot of injured people among the refugees.”

“As well as our soldiers who fought against the demons. We need to review our medicine stockpiles and collect reserves from all over the region. We probably need to rely on imports from other regions too.”

When it came to imports, the laboratory could not really do much by itself. We might be able to ask the exchange students for help, but we needed more supplies than that.

“Should we get Mrs. Rihn to request the imports from the administration?”

“Hm...no, I think we should stick to stuff we can do at the lab. Either way, we won’t be able to handle everything by ourselves, so we’ll just ask Maika to take our proposals to the leaders’ meeting. For now, we keep our train of thought going.”

“Right. We should get our superior to talk to the higher-ups.” I paused, then murmured, “I hope they’ll come back soon.” Reina chuckled. “Did I say something weird?”

“Yeah, if you think about it, it is strange.” Bewildered, I tilted my head to the side. Reina’s shoulders were shaking as she kept giggling. “I mean, we haven’t had any reports that Ash and Maika made it back safely from the Yanga region, and yet both you and I don’t doubt for a second that they’re okay. Isn’t that strange?”

Is it? Yeah, I guess it's strange! However, only when applied to anyone but Ash and Maika. When it came to these two, it wasn't strange at all.

"I mean, isn't it obvious they're safe?"

"Yeah, it is!" Reina's agreement was accompanied by a delightful smile. "And even if we are under attack from a pack of over a hundred demons, I trust Ash to deal with them at Fort Phoenix."

"Isn't that obvious too?"

"Yeah, it is!"

As we were both savoring the entertaining nature of Ash's existence, Rockel, one of our senior staff members, flung the door open.

"The idiot's giving a speech in the cafeteria!" That was all Rockel said, but we immediately knew what was going on. Just when she'd finally been able to laugh and relax, Reina was confronted by a new incident that made her knit her brows in disapproval.

"A large herd of demons has appeared! They are threatening the very existence of the Sacula region! We ought to unite and fight! Like our ancestors who planted the Sacula flag in this soil!" Torey spat out his speech in a pointlessly loud voice. His choice of words was as theatrical as ever. "Those who can fight, take up your arms and come with me to the frontlines! Let us stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our brave soldiers and pulverize the demon herd together!"

Back in the day, Reina's saucepan would have shut up the commotion with a loud bang, but that saucepan was no longer at the lab. Instead, I tried telling everyone to shut up by loudly kicking open the door. It seemed that the noise had successfully communicated my intentions; the cafeteria had fallen very silent.

"What is this commotion? Do you not have any work today?" Considering how many people were gathered despite it not being lunch break, most of them must have been slacking off. The lab chief was asking for responsibility. Apologizing was the smart choice.

“Chief Reina, now is not the time to worry about work. You should know yourself that the footsteps of doom are approaching Sacula!” Objecting with a know-it-all attitude was the stupid choice.

“If you are referring to the reports that demon herds have appeared in a neighboring region, then yes, I heard them. We have been sending out weapons from the lab in response. Therefore, this is no time to be slacking off,” Reina explained, but as expected, Torey didn’t seem to understand.

“More importantly, we should send as many people as possible as reinforcements to the frontline! Otherwise, the demons will roll over Sacula like an avalanche and cause suffering to our loved ones and the citizens we are sworn to protect!”

“The selected troops have already been stationed at the frontline fort according to plan. They may have expected to fight the Yanga troops, but they also anticipated encountering demons. Don’t you understand that any unplanned reinforcements would only cause trouble at this stage?”

“Please forgive me, but you are the one who doesn’t understand, Chief Reina. We cannot contain a herd of over a hundred demons with one single fort like that. Your fear clouds your judgment.” Torey sounded apologetic as he underestimated Reina’s abilities. He continued, “At this rate, many of the soldiers on the frontlines will be helplessly slaughtered! We need to gather brave people and hasten to join the fight at Fort Phoenix, the stronghold named after the famous Sir Fenix! Right, Hermes?”

Don’t rope me in. I’m not great at talking to people in the first place. I don’t want to get involved with someone so difficult that you tire out Reina after just a short chat. I openly displayed my disgust on my face, and Reina raised her eyebrows.

“Hey, that’s no way to talk to Vice-Chief Hermes!”

“It’s not like you to suddenly raise your voice like that, Chief Reina. I imagine you are confused following Sir Fenix and Lady Maika’s deaths, but please calm down.”

At that moment, my facial expression completely changed. I must have looked like a different person. For the same reason that Reina had become speechless.

“What the hell did you just say?” I asked the idiot in a voice sharp enough to cut metal. He shouldn’t even say that as a joke. “What happened to Ash and Maika?”

“I imagine you’re in shock too. You went to the academy together. But you have to accept reality. Lady Maika and Sir Fenix were in the Yanga region when the large demon herd attacked. No matter how you look at it, it’s hard to imagine they are still alive...”

“Did you announce their deaths in front of everyone?” Going by the stupid, clueless look on Torey’s face, it was safe to assume he had indeed done so. A scan of the cafeteria confirmed my suspicions. All the staff members were letting out sighs heavier than lead. “How can you declare one of our region’s key figures dead without confirmation amidst a time of crisis like this? And *Ash* of all people?!”

Maika may be of a higher rank, but presently, loudly proclaiming Ash dead was a bigger problem. Ash, the phoenix. That name had become a living legend among the Sacula troops. All of my former classmates who had joined the military said so. Even Glen, who was usually out of the loop when it came to rumors. It was said that the phoenix’s presence on the battlefield prevented any casualties.

Moreover, it wasn’t possible to dismiss those rumors, because his past achievements backed them up. When the werewolf had appeared outside Itsutsu city, nobody except Ash himself had been hurt. Likewise, the troops hadn’t suffered any losses during their fight against the treants at Ajole village. While some Ajole villagers had gone missing prior to Ash’s arrival, the overall damage caused by the treants had been extremely limited. Many considered this a miracle compared to the huge damages resulting from past demon attacks in the Sacula region.

Ash’s reputation as a godlike commander was known across all of Sacula thanks to the soldiers who had fought at Ajole village loudly telling their tales at bars, and troubadours spreading the word even further. It was due to his reputation as the phoenix that ever since tensions with the Yanga region had been on the rise, it had been decided that Ash would be going to the frontlines.

Ash was indeed still a novice. Born a peasant. However, he was also miraculously lucky. Anyone with his luck would surely pull through this time as well. That belief had given confidence to the soldiers headed for the frontlines and eased the population's worries. Even I didn't fully grasp how one name could have had such a large effect.

But Torey had stupidly attacked that reputation. That pissed me off. What made me even angrier was the fact that he had declared my admirable friend, my fellow dreamer, and by extension my dream's continued existence, dead.

"Okay, listen up everyone. There's no way Ash would've died from this. No chance in hell. Not even if the World Tree were to fall over."

I was certain that soon there would be news of his sudden return. Of course, together with Maika and their escort of knights. We were talking about the phoenix Ash. If you heard that he was dead, you should assume it was false news or misinformation first.

You ever hear the story of his disappearance in Noscula? When he was nine years old, he had gone missing in the forest for three days. Right as the villager had started his funeral, he returned out of nowhere. How old was he now? Besides, he was with Maika. Even if they went missing in the Roaring Dragon Mountains for a month, they would no doubt come back unharmed.

Reina keenly nodded in agreement, even if it was based on my gut feeling. "He is absolutely right. If you wanted to kill Ash, you would have to borrow the power of the dragon god—and even then, I'm not sure you could finish him off."

Probably not. Maybe all the three gods together. It appeared that the former prisoners shared my opinion.

"I don't think even the dragon god could kill him."

"Can he even die? Won't he just come back to life?"

"The phoenix resurrects after it dies. So technically, he would die once."

"That may be technically correct, but if he's just going to revive right away, doesn't that basically negate the death?"

This is how you should be talking about Ash! He's not the kind of guy who quietly crawls into his grave. Even hypothetically. And yet there was someone here who already tried to bury him.

"You're dreaming too much! No matter how great of a commander or swordsman he is, there is no way he could survive a demon siege!"

"Aren't you also basing your argument on your own delusions? Or did you see Ash and Maika getting killed by the demons?"

"I mean... I didn't see it with my own eyes, but if you think about the situation —"

"The Yanga citizens managed to run away. So why shouldn't Ash and Maika, who are accompanied by guards, be able to escape?" *If you keep persisting, I'll throw you into an active steam engine.* I glared at him while rolling up my sleeves, and Torey backed off.

"F-Fine. I'll admit that I acted too rashly in regard to Sir Fenix and Lady Maika." *Not just in that regard. Most of your actions are too rash. Like when you left your post and were taken hostage during the attack on the lab.* "But we need to support the frontlines! We have a lot of male staff here and people who know how to use the new weapons! I know it will be a difficult fight and people will get injured and die! But we cannot defend this soil if we cower in fear!"

"More of your delusions. People might get injured, but nobody's going to die. Our troops will celebrate a complete victory. After all, we are deploying the new weapons that were built to deal with more than a hundred demons at once."

It was a defense program that Ash had developed for a time like this. Aiming for zero casualties. Knowing him and his enthusiasm at the time, I was completely confident that it would work. However, anyone who didn't know Ash wouldn't understand.

"You've not been making any sense since earlier! Those demons have destroyed city after city in the past. They are the disaster that wiped the ancient civilization off the face of the earth! Stop dreaming!"

"What are you saying? I'll keep dreaming until the moment I die." Why did I

have to explain something so obvious? “It’s almost as if you don’t know where you are. And you have no idea what kind of nutters you are working with.”

This was a gambling den filled with nutters who couldn’t sleep at night because of how big their dreams were. There was a nutter who wanted to fly in the sky, a nutter who wanted to build the fastest locomotive possible, a nutter who wanted to illuminate the night with an everlasting light, a nutter who wanted to cure all fatal diseases, a nutter who wanted to feed the whole world, and I could go on... In essence, it was a nuthouse.

These were a bunch of exceptionally awkward people who hadn’t let go of their dreams despite being repeatedly told that it was unfeasible or impossible. Too greedy to scale down our big dreams. And Ash had enticed us with his top-class furnace, providing an opportunity to work toward achieving our big dreams as they were.

“Kicking a measly hundred or two hundred demons to the curb without any casualties is a *small* dream here. A coward who doesn’t even dare tackling a boring goal like that shouldn’t go around giving lectures.” *Isn’t that right?* I raised my voice and addressed my fellow crazy dreamers. “Are the weapons that you created with your blood, sweat, and tears so blunt that they can’t even deal with a hundred demons? Did you have so much time on your hands that you created something useless?”

I didn’t. I didn’t have any spare time at all. If I wanted to build an airplane and achieve my dream of flying through the sky in my lifetime, I had to keep moving forward without looking left or right. Yet, I decided to take a detour when Ash approached me because I was also fascinated by his dream.

“We only stopped working toward our own goals and building those weapons because we endorsed Ash’s vision of easily repelling those demons no matter their numbers! You say they destroyed the ancient civilization? That’s only because they didn’t have us or Ash back then!”

It was because of us and our weapons that we would be able to drive back the demon herd. Didn’t it feel good to boast a little? That was the reason why I had interrupted my plane project to manufacture weapons.

“Don’t tell me you don’t have any confidence in the things you create? You’re

not losers, are you?” My question lit a spark that ignited their fuel. My fellow foolish dreamers denied it with voices that suggested that their own motive engines were turning at full speed. I looked at Torey, the one person who didn’t have a motive engine inside of him. “You need to start observing what we’re doing here. Right now, you’re a loser who doesn’t understand anything.”

We arrived at the Northern Roaring Dragon Mountains and Anti-Yanga Defense Fort seven days after escaping the Yanga capital.

“I am exhausted.” That was the first thing I said after being called to the strategy meeting room. It had been set up at the center of the fort right after our arrival.

In contrast, the acting count nodded solemnly. After hearing about the strange developments in the Yanga region, he had rushed to the frontlines presuming the worst-case scenario. “You’re incredible as usual, Ash. You brought your entire team back alive from a city attacked by hundreds of demons, and you’re merely exhausted.”

“I did think we were going to die.”

“But you didn’t.” *If I was dead, I wouldn’t feel exhausted. I just escaped my near death and rushed to meet you in my dirty clothes, and this is how you greet me! What a horrible boss!*

“Besides, it is thanks to Maika’s bravery that the guards are safe. She put up an amazing fight when we broke through the city gate.” *They’ll definitely turn that courageous display into a play.*

“I’ll read the details in your report later.”

“May I write in the form of a story?”

“I’ll allow it.” *Yay! What a great boss with a playful mind!* “In any case, I am sincerely delighted that you made it back alive, Ash. I’m ten thousand times more at ease than a week ago.”

“I would love to take a little break, but it does not look like I will get that chance.” I sighed and studied the map laid out on the table. “Do we know the

demons' movements?"

"Broadly, yes. According to the escaped refugees and peddlers, as well as some of our scouts, the werewolves are headed this way." Lord Itsuki's finger drew a line from the Yanga capital to Sacula's borders. "The villages and cities in this area have been attacked. It is unclear whether the demons have been moving in other directions as well. It's too far for scouting and there haven't been many refugees from those areas."

"Be it the whole herd or only part of it, it seems safe to say that a considerable number of demons are headed for Sacula."

"But there's also good news. It appears there are no more dragons. It's only werewolves." The dragons had said that my "brethren" wanted to be put to sleep by my hand. That had probably been an advance notice that the werewolves were heading my way.

"Well, that does not really change much. How is the encampment construction coming along?"

"I've also just arrived, so I can't say much, but according to yesterday's report, it's been going smoothly. You should probably check for yourself."

"When I entered the fort, it did not look like there were any problems, so I am not too worried."

"Did it?" Lord Itsuki confirmed. He sounded more puzzled than doubtful. "I've never seen any encampment like it, so I've got no idea what a problem would look like."

"It is a very innovative fort." Until now, swords, spears, and ballistae had been used as the main weapons in war, but we had added explosives to our arsenal. In one go, we modernized the battlefield. Although I still had no conclusive evidence that our tactics were suitable, given that our opponents had not modernized yet. "In any case, the werewolves could arrive at any moment, so we are currently making our final preparations. For the rest, we will have to find out as we fight."

"We don't even know how many will advance on us."

It was said thirty werewolves were enough to destroy a city. This number

related to the ballistae's ability to react. It was not too difficult for the infantry to block the werewolves' path. If they knew what they were doing, even a single person could put up a good defensive fight, similar to what Maika and I had done.

Unfortunately, when it came to *killing* werewolves, the difficulty level spiked. Without enough stopping power, such as the heavy firepower of a ballista, most attacks were too weak. In fact, the ballista's main purpose was not even to kill the demons but to pin them to the ground with a spear-like arrow so that the soldiers could gang up on it afterward.

However, ballistae were incapable of rapid fire. Even if you used multiple ballistae, you could only take a limited number of opponents on at once. To make matters worse, werewolves were great at scaling stone walls. It still depended on the individual packs' movements, but as a result, the likelihood of the werewolves invading the city drastically increased when there were more than ten of them. With more than twenty, they would likely capture the walls, and with more than thirty, there was a chance of them overrunning the settlement in its entirety.

Incidentally, I had counted more than thirty werewolves while running away from the Yanga capital. Going by the number of howls, there must have been at least five times as many in total. And that was still a low estimate, and did not include the dragons.

In addition, if the number of werewolves exceeded one hundred, the entire region risked annihilation. As if to substantiate that claim, half the Yanga region had been destroyed already.

"Ash, I want you to be honest..." The acting count of the Sacula region, which had probably more firsthand experience with demon attacks than any other region, looked at me with grave concern on his face. "Will it be tough?" In the worst-case scenario, it would be this man's decision to abandon the region and the countless lives within.

It was rare to see the acting count's face so devoid of joy and excitement, so I decided to give a cautious reply.

"Probably not." It should be fine. Of course, I could not say with certainty, but

I did think it would be all right. If we were dealing with the kind of numbers that had annihilated the late-stage ancient civilization's forts—hundreds of dragons and thousands of werewolves—we would not be able to do much, but this fort could easily handle one or two hundred werewolves.

“Two hundred...”

“Even if their numbers have decreased following the attack on the Yanga region, I would expect more than a hundred—probably close to two hundred—to arrive. Although I do not think it will go up to three hundred.”

“Three hundred...”

There had only been one instance in the last century where a three-digit number of demons had been observed, so there probably would not be more. Although it should be noted that instance was the attack on the Yanga region a few days ago.

“That number is still within the expected range for our equipment. My only concerns lie with our novel tactics. Most soldiers are not very proficient in handling the new weapons yet.”

“Didn't you say you could make up for that with the fort?”

“Yes, the fort should cover that. Otherwise, there is not really anything to worry about.” Maybe morale, but the Sacula troops were veterans, so I felt at ease in that regard. During our encounter with the treants, they had reacted very professionally when our transport mission had suddenly turned into an all-out fight against demons. As commander, I was extremely grateful that, in the face of a large number of enemies, I did not have to worry about the soldiers panicking and our front breaking down.

“You really are amazing, Ash. I don't know anyone else who could say and believe that things will be fine under these circumstances.”

“I can only say it because of these circumstances.”

I was the strongest I had ever been in my life. I was not afraid of anything.

It had been eight years since I had found my calling. Eight years of running

forward, chasing after my dream. I had only stopped once, when Maika had snatched me away for a moment. Eight years full of pain, hardships, and fun. And this fort represented the culmination of that time.

The Northern Roaring Dragon Mountains and Anti-Yanga Defense Fort—I refused to call it “Fort Phoenix”—was built on an ancient, small hill that overlooked its surroundings. I was currently keeping an eye on the border between the forest and plains from atop the watchtower, which had been built much higher than the rest of the structure. I observed a pack of werewolves with their metal fur sparkling in the summer sun.

I had expected them to split up and attack as soon as they saw our fort, but it seemed that their overall movement as a pack was organized after all. Since last night, small groups of werewolves had appeared sporadically, but they had all stopped at the line between the forest and plains, waiting for the rest of their kind to gather.

Currently, I counted 210 of the creatures. None of them wandered off into the forest. They all stood with their two-meter-tall bodies, glaring at their prey.

“I guess my higher estimate was right,” I muttered from atop the watchtower, “but not more than expected.” Four hundred would have been tough. Three hundred would have claimed a lot of victims. But two hundred? That was fine.

The more than two hundred werewolves let out roar. At the same time, the mysterious, inaudible voice inside my head told me what they were saying.

“Brother, I have come!”

“I am weary...”

“It has been so long. Too long.”

“I beg of you, brother”

“Let me sleep.”

“Brother.”

I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, but I’ll grant you your wish, my brethren. If you want to sleep, just charge forward. And keep running at full speed until the very last moment. Your death shall be my life. May we become

true brethren. With sympathy, respect, and affection, my life's work shall grant your wish of eternal sleep.

“Come, my brethren, I am here!” I proclaimed while waving my spear against the sky. The piece of cloth wrapped around its top fluttered in the wind. The red flag embroidered with the phoenix symbol showed my enemies their target. Lord Itsuki had left the flag as a parting gift. However, he would never get me to call this place “Fort Phoenix!” I had no idea whether the werewolves understood my intentions, but all at once, they began charging the fort.



Heavy bass sounds reverberated as the lumps of metal approached the fort. However, it would not be easy for them to reach their goal. What did a hunter do when they could predict the movement of their prey? Simple: they planted traps.

The werewolves carelessly stepped into the squares made from red-colored wooden sticks that indicated where traps had been set up. It triggered a momentary flash and an ear-deafening explosion, followed by a burst of iron scraps and balls slicing into the werewolves.

After getting our hands on sulfur, the laboratory had started developing gunpowder weapons. And if we could manufacture flash grenades, then we could also make fragmentation grenades filled with deadly iron scraps and balls. Furthermore, if we could make fragmentation grenades, we could also produce land mines that violently exploded the moment you stepped on the trigger.

We manufactured loads and planted them all over the plains, turning the area between two hundred and four hundred meters away from the fort into a beautiful minefield. Welcome to our hellish fields of iron flowers! A match made in heaven for metal wolves!

I was not sure whether they had understood my warm welcome message, but the werewolves recklessly stormed the minefield. Caught up in the explosions, they were blown away in all directions, and their bodies were smashed.

Even their natural metal fur armor could not protect them from the blazing iron balls flying faster than the speed of sound. Their limbs were ripped apart, their flesh and bones pulverized. There were even some werewolves whose heads had been shattered from the jaw upward.

But the pack did not stop. They regenerated their gouged flesh and regrew their fangs and even their limbs while running through the minefield.

“The same fantasy nonsense as before. I am glad you are as healthy as ever.”

Between fifty and sixty werewolves had fallen behind. Judging by their regenerative abilities, half would gradually revive. Not only could their eyeballs regrow, but they continued living even after suffering damage to their brains. I was not so naive to assume that I could finish them off with a minefield. But I

had managed to dampen their momentum. Normally, they would have formed into one large metal avalanche and headed toward the fort, but thanks to the cushioning of the bomb blasts, their formation had shattered.

Next, a spider's nest of barbed wire entanglements awaited the slowed pack. We had set up several layers starting at two hundred meters distance from the fort. And now the werewolves had arrived at the first.

The first entanglement tore apart as soon as they touched it. The second layer's supports broke under the weight of a group of werewolves. They were truly powerful beasts. However, it was not like we had only set up ten or twenty wire fences. And we were not planning on trapping them one at a time.

Eventually, the wire that had been wrapped around the broken support entwined around a werewolf's chest. Subsequently, another werewolf stepped on the wire's end. As his fellow demon's weight pulled on his chest, the first werewolf lost his balance and fell over. This tightened the wire and tripped up the other werewolves in the vicinity. Similar incidents were happening all over the place, quickly causing a major demon traffic jam.

As I mentioned, the wires were set up at the two-hundred-meter mark in front of the fort. In addition, this fort had already been optimized to effectively test all the gunpowder weapons our laboratory had been developing.

I could hear the gunners' voices from beneath the watchtower. The guns were located inside a brick bunker on a concrete bulwark. In simple terms, it was an artillery shooting range fortified with brick and concrete so that it could withstand shelling.

"Do you have eyes on your targets?"

"Yes! They're in the same spot that we used for test firing. So our position is good."

"That's why we chose that spot for testing. All right, load your cannons!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Close the breech!"

"Breech closed!"

When I heard the artillery commander say “ready” with a content voice, I cupped my ears. A moment later...

“Fire!”

That word was drowned out by the chorus of forty muzzles firing off. While the blasts rang in our ears, or maybe even earlier, the werewolf traffic jam located two hundred meters away in the kill zone was blown away all at once. We were using cannister shots filled with countless iron balls as shells. The werewolves, who were already entangled in barbed wire, slowed down even further after being hit by a second round of blazing fastballs. Some groups had virtually come to a standstill. I had ordered the gunners in advance to target those groups in particular with a second barrage.

“Begin loading the next round!”

“I’ll open the breech, watch out for debris!”

“Get out of the way, you’ll get hurt!”

“No need to rush! Proceed calmly! They are lying on the ground far away!”

The artillery commanders’ angry voices were warranted. As I had told Lord Itsuki, I was a bit worried in regard to the soldiers’ gunpowder weapon proficiency.

At present, there were roughly seven hundred soldiers at the fort. Only two hundred of them, the reserve soldiers, had some training in the use of guns. The five hundred emergency conscripts had only just learned how to operate them from the standing troops.

Of the seven hundred soldiers, two hundred were stationed at the cannons. Due to the high risks, most of them were reservists, who supervised the few conscripts among their ranks. That seemed to have been the right decision; the second round of shelling was launched at an incredible speed, successfully hitting the werewolves. Their efficiency was largely thanks to the newly developed breech-loading artillery.

With muzzle-loaders, where you loaded and fired the shells from the same opening, you had to push both the gunpowder and shells to the very back of the muzzle, which meant that reloading took quite some time. Depending on the

situation, reloading a heavy shell might even require repositioning the cannon. Accordingly, you had to readjust your aim, making rapid succession shooting impossible.

In contrast, the breech-loaders were equipped with an opening mechanism at the rear that made reloading extremely easy. You just had to open the breech and insert the shell. Usually, gunners stood behind the cannons when firing them, so it did not require any dramatic movements.

The drawbacks of breech-loaders were the high manufacturing costs and specialized production equipment required. Even our lab could not easily manufacture them. In order to finish this number of units in time, with a heavy heart, we had had to give up on both the automatic loading mechanism and the recoil absorber, the mechanism that automatically returned the cannon to its initial position after kickback. Ideals and practicality were constantly at odds with each other.

In any case, thanks to our expenditures on rapid firing ability, the artillery squad continued to smash up the werewolves. The demon herd that should have rolled over us like a tsunami had now been split up into roughly ten smaller groups, forced to launch scattered attacks.

Eight werewolves had managed to avoid getting caught in the kill zone. As the vanguard, they had missed the traffic jam. They had passed the wire entanglements at the two-hundred-meter mark and advanced all the way to the hundred-meter mark, which was easy to spot due to the flags planted in the ground.

Now then, I had mentioned that there were approximately seven hundred soldiers at the fort. Two hundred of those were positioned as gunners. What about the remaining five hundred? Of course, some were using the more familiar spears, swords, and ballistae. Those amounted to maybe another two hundred soldiers. That left us with three hundred more. Just like the gunners, they were stationed inside the bulwark, taking careful aim through crenels at the hundred-meter mark kill zone.

“Fire!”

Roughly fifty gunshots against eight targets. A hail of bullets indiscriminately

rained down on the pitiful targets and their surroundings at the hundred-meter mark, where they fell over face first. The three hundred soldiers had used rifles.

This was the result of an engineer, whose great dream it was to make an airplane fly, fulfilling my selfish request of not wanting any casualties when facing a measly hundred demons. By continuously improving the various motive power engines, he had optimized the lathe machinery, making possible mass rifling—spiraling grooves on the inside of a gun barrel that enhanced effective range and accuracy.

Of course, these rifles were also breech-loaded. Unfortunately, it had been impossible to implement automatic reloading, but it was possible to load the next bullet with a single bolt action. In other words, as soon as the werewolves started healing from the first barrage, a second hail of bullets came pouring down on them.

While the soldiers were finishing off the eight werewolves in front, another group of five entered the rifle kill zone. Then another six, followed by groups of three and five, and finally eleven. They all fell prey to the rifles as if they were shooting practice targets.

When all their targets had disappeared from the two-hundred-meter zone, the gunners also joined in. The steel beasts who had tried to wash the fort away were now being swallowed by a wave of red-hot iron.

To my amazement, there were still a few werewolves who had managed to swim through the waves of gunfire in the rifle kill zone. Demons were truly an irregular existence. Against a human army, this would have been more than overkill. But it looked like we would have to fight about twenty beasts in close combat.

“It is time for the finishing touches, everyone,” I declared.

The two hundred soldiers who had taken up positions at the watchtower atop the bulwark raised their weapons and let out a war cry. These were elite warriors, Sacula’s cream of the crop. After reaching the bulwark, the werewolves dug their claws into the brick and concrete walls, climbing up one by one with an agility that belied their large build.

From time to time, some curious beasts stuck their arms into a crenel

attempting to mess with the guns and rifles inside, but most headed for the watchtower where we stood ready with our weapons drawn.

“Unlike with Yanga, we outnumber them this time,” Maika said. She stood next to me with excitement on her face as she drew her sword. “He he. I had to focus on evading last time, so I couldn’t really attack, but now it’s my turn to beat them to a pulp.”

This time, Maika had brought a thin blade optimized for stabbing attacks. In our previous fight, strikes and slashing attacks had proven ineffective, so she had decided to focus on piercing their weak spots.

“Make sure not to get injured,” I rebuked my fiancée. While I was gripping my spear, she was jumping for joy.

“That goes double for you. Don’t nearly die again!”

“I cannot really argue with that...” I muttered and dropped my shoulders. But I could not help being worried about my charming Maika, who was suddenly overcome with excitement.

“All right! I’ll clean this mess up in a flash with a smile on my face!”

“That sounds great but—” I would have loved for her to stay calm. But she dashed off at top speed and vanished into thin air before I could finish my sentence. With her swift step, she intercepted a werewolf who had just climbed atop the watchtower. Quick as lightning, she performed two thrusts that accurately pierced the eyes of the demon, who in turn let out a loud yet feeble scream.

As the werewolf was writhing in excruciating pain from losing his sight, without a moment’s delay, a male guard, Maika’s backup, used his long-shafted broadax to trip the demon up. At the same time, he made use of the momentum of his swift movements to lift his broadax up in preparation for a heavy strike.

With a grunt, he casually gathered all his strength, and his arm and back muscles expanded by about thirty percent. The broadax fell down upon the werewolf’s head with enough force to cut a hole in the ground. It effortlessly split open the demon’s skull that was supposed to be as hard as steel. The

werewolf's regenerative power seemed useless with a huge iron plate stuck in its brain, and the beast broke out into eerie convulsions.

“Oh, you're amazing, old man!”

“Nowhere near as remarkable as you, young lady. After you incapacitated him, all I had to do was swing down my ax.”

From an outside perspective, it was pretty remarkable that the guard had managed to coordinate his attack to come without delay after Maika's swift offensive. That required more than mere strength.

In addition, similar scenes were taking place all around the watchtower. Strong soldiers carrying heavy weapons such as broadaxes and large hammers were in charge of delivering the finishing blows. The more technically skilled fighters, wielding comparatively lighter weapons such as spears and swords, were in charge of slowing the demons down. In that combination, they were battling one enemy after the other in groups of ten.

While we may have outnumbered our enemy, it still required a lot of skill to individually draw them out and surround them in a fixed spot without hindering one's allies. Especially when the enemy was a werewolf who would ignore most attacks. Therefore, we had gathered the most experienced warriors here. Nonetheless, most groups were not managing to knock their opponents out as easily as Maika. However, none were losing either.

“At this rate, we will suffer almost no damages...” As soon as I had finished speaking, I spotted a second werewolf creeping up on a group that was already engaged in combat. It was too dangerous to let it climb up now. Without thinking, I started to charge forward with my spear.

At most, I had intended to push the werewolf off the bulwark and buy some time with my initial thrust—but my attack was more powerful than expected. As I stepped forward, I could feel an unusual amount of power flowing through my legs. I broke into a cold sweat as I quickly accelerated to a point where I could no longer control my speed.

Before I could scream, I realized what had happened. Before now, my physical abilities had always improved a little whenever I had defeated a demon. But so far, that had been limited to one or two demons at a time. I wondered how

many had recently died on the battlefield today.

My spearhead pierced the werewolf's abdominal muscles, which should have been harder than metal armor, like tofu. Still, my body showed no signs of slowing down. Naturally, the laws of physics made me collide head-on with the werewolf. *Like a billiard ball*, I thought to myself.

Following my life-risking tackle, the werewolf's huge body slightly rose from the ground, then fell off the watchtower. Since the werewolf had acted as a cushion, my inertia had decreased to near zero. I momentarily let go of the spear and bid my enemy farewell. Somehow, the demon had looked dumbfounded as it opened its jaw filled with violent fangs. My expression could not have been much different.

I stared at the empty spot from where the werewolf had fallen down for a short while and composed myself. I touched my forehead, which had just crashed full force into the demon's metal fur, but I could not make out any bumps let alone blood. *I see. That's how much I've leveled up because of our demon hunt. But I assume it's only happening to me.*

I honestly felt like I had surpassed human limits. No human could blow away a two-hundred kilo metal mass simply by running as fast as they could and get away without a scratch. I felt closer to being a demon at this rate. In order to confirm that my power output had skyrocketed, I repeatedly opened and closed my fist. *I'd never thought I'd be afraid to use my full strength. Like a movie hero...*

As I was indulging in deep thought, my senses, which had undoubtedly heightened, picked up a presence down below. All of a sudden, a werewolf with a spear stuck in its belly appeared on the edge of the watchtower. It must have jumped because it had deemed it too dangerous to climb up slowly. And while the spear was broken, I still recognized it as mine.

Climbing back up and making such a dynamic entrance right after having a hole punched in your stomach required an incredible amount of willpower, but scarily enough, at the back of my mind, I sensed that I could probably do the same in my current state. If I ever mistakenly pulled a stunt like that, people would look at me as if they had seen a ghost.

As I was busy running simulations in my head, the werewolf jumped easily two meters up into the air, and its brawny arm pulled back, ready to swing downward, accelerated by the gravitational pull. The destructive force of that blow would most likely rival that of a shelling. While the bulwark had been built to withstand bombardments, one could never be one hundred percent sure. And, of course, I did not want any holes in my new fort.

Therefore, I decided to block the werewolf's blow. I caught his downward swinging right arm with my left hand. *Ah, that's super heavy. And super solid. And it super hurts.* All of my bones, joints, and muscles from the tips of my toes to my left arm creaked and screamed out in agony. But the following moment, I had already completely recovered again.

When the pain disappeared, I flexed my muscles and I could feel a force flowing through my body. Could I by any chance have obtained some mysterious power from defeating demons?

I flexed the muscles in my right arm. In tandem with my normal physical strength, I felt something more. As if there was a second me inside my body, and I was drawing upon his muscle strength and energy.

As an experiment, I channeled that power into my fist and punched the werewolf in the stomach. I dug into the metal fur, pierced its flesh, and crushed its bones. The huge demon's body fell onto its back and slid across the ground as if it had been hit by a truck.

Uh oh. That werewolf was lighter than I thought. At this rate, it would crash into the nearby group engaged in battle. I hurriedly grabbed a standing spear to finish it off.

Wait, this is the spear with the phoenix flag attached to it. Without thinking, I had grabbed the super important symbol that signified that the fort's command was alive and well. In essence, it was only supposed to be taken down if we suffered defeat. *I probably shouldn't be using this, but human life's irreplaceable, and I'm going to return it right away. It's probably fine.*

While I was coming up with excuses in my mind, my body adopted a throwing stance. The werewolf had stopped sliding on its back and now tried to stand back up. To prevent that from happening, I threw the large caliber fl  chette at

the werewolf's head.

Approximately fifty centimeters of the spear's tip had penetrated the demon's skull through its eyeball and pulled the creature back down. *Good. That went according to plan.* I cheerfully rushed over to the body to pull out the spear and replace it with the sword that I was wearing. That may have been overkill, but it was best to introduce a foreign body into the brain to suppress the werewolf's healing powers. Even if it managed to regenerate, it would not be able to properly move like this.

However, as of right now, returning the flag was more important than killing the werewolf. If anyone noticed that it had gone, their fighting resolve might waver. I grabbed the fort's symbol and hurriedly carried it back to its designated place.

The general commander fighting with the fort's flag as a weapon was unheard of. If possible, I wanted to return it stealthily so that nobody—at that moment, I noticed that two hundred pairs of eyes around the watchtower were directed at me. *What's wrong, everyone? Focus on the fight! Look, the werewolves—are all gone.*

"Um... All squads, please report your status. Someone deliver the same message to the rifle and artillery—" Before I could finish my orders, messengers from the rifle and artillery squads arrived. With a salute, they gave thorough reports. It appeared that currently no enemies capable of combat were in visible range of the fort. However, since we were dealing with werewolves, they would remain on alert just to make sure they would not revive.

"Um... Infantry stay alert too. Rifle and artillery squads, please stand by as is. Although it is probably safe to say..." I sneakily returned the flag to its original place while trying to play it off with disorganized orders. I forcefully cleared my throat. *You all know what to do, right? I'm the boss, and you're the subordinates. At a time like this, you need to show kindness to your superior.* I surveyed the entire scene, then gave a signal and raised my voice: "We won!"

The infantry cheered unanimously in response. *That's the spirit! The best reaction is pretending you didn't see anything!* A moment later, the rifle and artillery squads also started cheering from inside the bulwark. Either they had

heard the infantry's considerate gesture, or they had been listening closely.

"Ash!" Pushing her way through the cheering crowd, Maika jumped into my arms. "We did it, Ash! Total victory! As expected from the invincible phoenix!"

"I could not have done it without all of you. All the squads did a great job. You too, of course, Maika." She almost squeezed out my organs when she hugged me. I returned the affection by patting her back.

And then they lived happily ever after—is what it would have said in one of the stories that I liked so much. But the hard part came afterward. As people often said, before the festival, you are excited; during it, you are immersed; and after it, you are working the hardest.

First, we had to clean up the battlefield, then collect the werewolves' corpses—which yielded precious resources—analyze the new weapons' combat data, and recover lost military resources. All of those things were part of the postbattle cleanup. And that was already a lot of work by itself.

But on top of that, we also had to deal with the Yanga region problem. As a diplomatic ally, the House of Datara was providing some aid, but the damages were so devastating that they bore an incredible cost.

Yanga citizens were still fleeing to neighboring regions—mostly to Sacula—and the numbers would most certainly increase. We had the leeway to permanently settle some of the refugees, but it was impossible to look after an entire neighboring region, so unfortunately, we would eventually have to send the majority back.

Moreover, it was necessary to rebuild the Yanga region, but its leader had died during all the chaos—the cause of death was not important given all that turmoil—and there were no decent civic or military officers left who could take over and preserve the established order.

The House of Yanga was hated by all its Frontier Alliance neighbors, so it did not seem likely that anyone would cooperate if they stayed in power.

Honestly, the Sacula region did not want to cooperate either. But we could not leave them to their own devices either. Many refugees would eventually

turn to banditry to make a living, which would disturb public safety on a large scale for a long time. In addition, one had to worry about plagues induced by deteriorating hygiene. My head hurt just thinking about all the problems ranging from budget to personnel to planning and defense...

The moment of our victory was also the start of an arduous rebuilding process.

Launching administrator function of the apocalypse scenario: "Resurrectioners".

Accepting scenario phase request 10534.

Processing request. Confirmed fatal delay in project.

Operation 01: "Star Eater Fenrir"—Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Fatal flaw in its existence. Maintenance required.

Operation 02: "World Tree Yggdrasil"—Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Major flaw in its existence. Maintenance required.

Operation 03: "Guiding Light Fenix"—Execution rate of its reason for being has not reached specified value. Main individual's activity confirmed. Currently in process of accomplishing its reason for being. Flaw in its existence. Synthesis with 03-EX required.

Operation 03-EX: "Treasure Guardian Fafnir"—no reason for being programmed due to its nature as emergency operation. Requires swift removal as soon as emergency is resolved.

Operation 01: "Star Eater Fenrir" declaring end of activities report 5864.

Processing report.

Accepting end of activities report 5864 for Operation 01: "Star Eater Fenrir".

Shutting down Operation 01: "Star Eater Fenrir".

Shutdown complete. Displaying message from Operation 01: "Star Eater Fenrir".

I am counting on you, brother. Fulfill your destiny as the Resurrectioner, He who restores life! I pray for humanity's resurrection.

Pausing administrator function.

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you for taking this book into your hands.

With the help and support of many people, I was able to publish the sixth compiled volume. I hope that you enjoyed reading what our hardworking team put together.

When I compiled the first volume, I was researching a single small village, but now for the sixth volume, I am looking at the extensive documents of multiple feudal lords and influential family lineages.

There are also documents on people from middle class or lower backgrounds who adapted with the times and became successful. Many of those documents don't just detail the joys and hardships of those people but also paint a picture of the circumstances under which they lived at the time. Between the lines of those records, you also found the names of people who had become ruined due to falling behind the times, and those whose dreams of a better life had been crushed.

Tracing documents from Sir Fenix's time, I realized how rapidly things had changed back then. Now it's clear that the werewolf assault on the Yanga region had even further accelerated the changing times.

Several of the remaining company records reveal the chaos that reigned. Large companies started evacuating their assets to outside regions, and conversely, large companies that gathered resources from outside Sacula, as well as peddlers and smaller companies, were conspiring with other companies...

Then there was the Quid Company, which had clearly been stocking up in preparation of disaster. However, when its subordinate merchants and business partners had started to become restless and wanted to flee, their leadership insisted on remaining in the Sacula region. Their response and their president's words are still celebrated to this day. This is one of my favorite quotes:

“Aren’t you forgetting something important by focusing on coins alone? People believe that if they pay adequate compensation, we will deliver the necessary goods. As merchants, we should strive to earn their golden trust rather than rusty coins.”

I’m confident I know who President Quid is referring to when he talks about “golden trust” relationships. There is no doubting the immense achievements of the merchants who stayed behind in the face of impending disaster to ensure the continued flow of goods.

People in other professions and positions reacted similarly. Sacula had not overcome the werewolf disaster because of one single special person; it was thanks to the entire population. The count, the acting count, the civil officers, the military officers, the artisans, the merchants, the citizens—they all worked together for a history-defining achievement.

Many accounts from those who had gathered at Fort Phoenix during the disaster remain. Most mention the fort flag hoisted on the watchtower. If it were to ever be taken down, it would mean that the fort had fallen. But no matter who looked at it at any given time, it had always spread its wings atop the fort. It appeared that Fort Phoenix had never been defeated for as long as it had fulfilled its duty.

Now that it has been decommissioned, this military facility serves as a museum. Even today, they still sometimes hoist a replica flag on memorial days. The original is displayed as a memento.

In fact, today is Werewolf War Victory Day. The day on which Sacula celebrated a big victory and went on to fight an even bigger battle. And the phoenix flag is spreading its wings wide.

Written while holding up a replica phoenix flag from the souvenir shop

Fushi no Kami 6

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma



“Here you go.
But you really should
drink more slowly.
Downing it like that
is bad for your health.”

REINA

“I really
can’t tell
whether you’ve
been paying
attention or
not...”

HERMES

《《 MAIKA 《《

*“Thanks, Seire.
Hmph. I thought I
could beat him today,
but I was wrong.”*

*“Lady Maika,
your hair is
getting dirty.
I will prepare
a bath for
you later,
but for now,
please wipe
off your sweat
with this
towel.”*

《《 SEIRE 《《



Bonus Short Stories

Hermes and His Lovely Friend

Damn. The exploded wreckage was a mortifying sight. My blood, sweat, and tears had gone into making this radial engine, and now it had been turned into such a mess that I'd need to start over from scratch.

I slumped down in front of the retrieved remains of the engine in the lab's garden. *What did I do wrong? I was pretty confident...* My mind went in circles as I reflected on my mistakes and came up with excuses. *I should focus on why it failed. Excuses won't help me.* I needed to learn from Ash. Come up with an alternate plan and break out of my slump as soon as I fall into it. Otherwise, I wouldn't ever catch up to him.

"Judging by the parts that broke, it must have been a failure on the inside. Looks like Ash's theory was spot on. I guess even if it works for the small model, it can still malfunction when you make it bigger," I moaned and tilted my head to the side, only to notice that a grinning face had appeared next to me.

"Yo, vice-chief! Glad you're doing all right."

It was senior lab member Rockel. We always argued about whether the steam engine or the radial engine were better. He had probably come to check on me because he was worried.

"Can I punch you? Your grin's pissing me off," I said, expressing my gratitude with my eyes fixed back on the engine.

"Do you know the definition of the word 'absurd?'"

"Ash?"

"Sometimes in combo with Lady Maika too."

Yep, that was an extremely absurd combo. Let's see what else we got...

"I'd also include the tears of a woman." I had no chance against Reina's tears.

Even more absurd than Ash. Probably the most absurd in the world.

“You finally finding out how absurd love can be? Took you long enough to show interest,” Rockel teased with a grin that pissed me off even more than the earlier one. So I jabbed my elbow into his side. I ignored his exaggerated scream and proceeded to correct him.

“Not what I meant. She scolded me badly for messing up the experiment and getting hurt. I don’t want you to cause Reina any trouble by recklessly spreading rumors—come on, I didn’t hit you that hard.”

“You’re stronger than you think... And you used to be so short and lanky when I first met you. Guess that just shows how much time has passed.”

“Now that you mention it, I have grown taller. Whereas you have...how should I put it...aged.”

Since we were seeing each other every day, I hadn’t really noticed, but he had more gray hairs and wrinkles than before.

“I look more like a dignified artisan now, don’t I?” He asked with a smile. But I knew how overexcited he could get when tinkering with the steam engine.

“I’ve known you for too long to feel any dignity.”

“You don’t even try to be charming...”

“Charm won’t help me build a plane.”

“That’s right. You need to be stubborn yet flexible, smart yet foolish, as well as stingy while spending lots of money, bold and dainty, and so on...” He repeatedly contradicted himself and gave up mid-sentence, but I roughly understood what he was getting at.

“Yeah, but it’s also fine if you’re just lucky enough. I’m pretty confident in my stubbornness, but I don’t think I’m very flexible. And I spend a lot of money, but I’m incapable of saving any.”

“I know. You’re so stubborn you won’t even acknowledge the steam engine as superior.”

“But I was lucky to make friends with Reina, a responsible accountant; Ash, a flexible jack-of-all-trades; and even a steam engine nutter.” In other words, as

long as you had good friends, things turned out okay. I stood up and brushed the dust off my pants. “Come on, Rockel, I’ll allow you to help. Tell me what went wrong with the radial engine! Make use of your experience blowing up steam engines!”

“That’s not how you ask for help.”

“Didn’t I help you when the steam engine exploded? Pay back your debt.”
Besides, I know you came to help. So, don’t complain and cover for my weaknesses.

Dorm Supervisor Rihn’s Pride

It’s been quite a while since I last dropped by the dorm. For some reason, I felt nostalgic hearing the footsteps echo in the hallway leading to the cafeteria. How many years had passed since I had been in charge of that class? *I’ve sure grown old if I can’t remember the number of years off the top of my head.*

I didn’t know how long I had been lost in my thoughts, but all of a sudden, lively voices sounded across the corridor. “Oh, Mrs. Rihn! I was just about to come get you since you were late!” The current dorm supervisor Kei flung open the door and called out to me with a red, smiling face.

“It looks like you are enjoying yourself, Kei.”

“Of course! The only time I’ll be happier than today will be my wedding ceremony!” Her voice sounded shrill; she seemed to be quite drunk. *By the way, what are your marriage prospects? I’ve not heard any rumors regarding any potential suitors...* While I was worrying about my junior’s future, she grabbed my hand and dragged me along to the cafeteria.

“Hey! Wait a moment. I don’t want to interrupt your party, so I’ll just make a brief, quiet appearance, then leave again. So don’t make a big deal of it.”

“What! No, no! We’ve already decided to greet you with applause!” As usual, when she got excited, she just ignored whatever anyone else said. I doubted anyone wanted to meet the nagging dorm supervisor who had always lectured everyone. “Hey, everyone! Sit straight and listen up! Our dear dorm supervisor has arrived!” After letting out an internal exasperated sigh, I quickly

straightened my back and bowed.

“Hello, everyone. It has been a while. It is great seeing you all so lively.” When I surveyed the scene, I noticed some faces that I saw on a regular basis, but others had changed so much that I barely recognized them. Still, I knew what all of them were up to from restlessly sorting through all the admin files during work. “I’m sure you will continue to gather more and more attention. Don’t forget your manners. And if you ever feel unsure about anything relating to etiquette, don’t hesitate to come to me. I always have time for a review lesson no matter how busy I am.”

Because you are my pride and joy, I thought to myself. I could never bring myself to say that out loud. To prevent my thoughts from leaking out, I cleared my throat before continuing. “Please enjoy the rest of your evening. And although this may be a casual party, don’t get too rowdy, okay?”

As I once again looked around the room full of familiar faces, they suddenly burst out into applause.

“Supervisor Rihn hasn’t changed!”

“I feel like I’m back at the academy!”

“I missed this feeling of my body tightening up!”

“Hey, hey! Quiet! Quiet, everyone!” Kei clapped her hands and calmed down the noisy crowd. Then Reina and Hermes ordered everyone to form a line. *What’s happening? This looks like the dorm’s moving out ceremony.* While I was staring in amazement, Kei smiled and straightened her back to adopt a proper waiting maid posture. As if she had magically sobered up.

“Only after we graduated from the military academy and officially entered the workforce did we finally understand the significance of your strict etiquette lessons. Be it interest-based negotiations or simply talking with people of a higher status, the more important the meeting, the more important the manners. We learned that without proper etiquette, you cannot get your point across.”

I was captivated by everyone’s immaculate postures; they substantiated Kei’s claims. All my students had grown into respectable people, including those

whom I had made stand in the corridor as punishment and those whom I had subjected to supervised etiquette drills at the cafeteria. “As such, we, the strongest class in the history of the military academy, would like to express our gratitude to our dormitory supervisor Mrs. Rihn with great love and respect. Thank you very much for your strict and thorough guidance.”

They resembled a field of ripe barley bending in the wind as they lowered their heads in unison. What a beautiful bow. I could feel their sincerity. At that moment, I realized that they were no longer my students but my work colleagues of equal status. *I’ve indeed grown old.* All the more reason for me to hold my head high and match their growth. Even if they were my equals, they were still my students. As their former dorm supervisor, my final and lifelong duty will be to continue being an example for these children so they can eventually surpass me.

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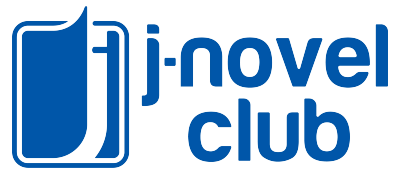
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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 6

by Mizuumi Amakawa

Translated by Maurice Alesch Edited by Callum May

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